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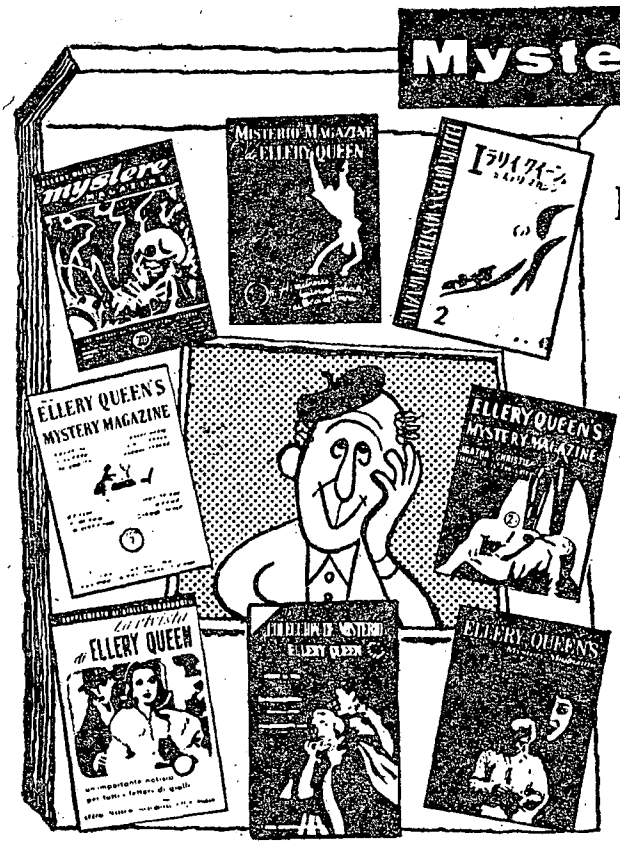

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a new story by

AUTHOR: **RUFUS KING**

TITLE: ***Happy Ending***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Halcyon, Florida

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The curiously clever, curiously perverted, and curiously moving story of a self-reliant heiress, a determined fortune hunter, and a theme song—I Love You Truly, Truly Dear.*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

THE BEACH HOUSE AT HALCYON, some miles north of Miami, where Lily Davidson spent each winter season had been built nine years ago, after the death of her parents and her inheritance of the Davidson (chain department stores) fortune. She occupied it with a fair-sized staff of servants, her seven French poodles, and her social secretary-companion, Miss Angela Stutz.

The place was in keeping with Lily's nature, being neither palatial nor ostentatious, but still large enough with its pool, patios, tennis court, and tropical garden to handle the splash parties, cook-outs, cocktail riots, and general run of diversions in favor among the colony's self-unamusable rich.

It was at one of these shindies that Lily met Bruce.

Nina Peters had brought him as her escort, and as it was a splash party the copper exposure of Bruce's physical-culture-magazine torso and legs had removed any necessity for speculation among the feminine guests.

"Among other accomplishments," Nina said during the introduction, "he sings. Mostly schmaltz—Carrie Jacobs Bond stuff and the bluer Berlin. If he ever dates you, Lily, wear ear plugs."

They saw one another with increasing frequency after that, Lily and Bruce, and their intimacy gradually shifted from the more general parties to ones where they were alone at dinner, or dancing,

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or taking long aimless drives in Lily's convertible under the subtle magic of the Florida moon.

At such times Bruce would sing, softly, with his fullish lips close to Lily's (unplugged) ear, and ever and again he would return to what amounted to his theme song, the smooth, desire-packed wallop of C. J. Bond's *I love you truly, truly dear— life with its sorrow, life with its tear*—and so forth.

It went over big, to the extent that even Lily's long skepticism about fortune hunters began to separate at its seams and she was willing to accept the mad possibility that Bruce really cared for her for herself alone.

"You're making a mistake about him, Lily," her secretary-companion finally warned her. "The bum's a bum. He'll break your heart."

"Possibly," Lily agreed. "But nicely so."

"There is nothing nice about Mr. Bruce Hamilton James. I telephoned Frieda and asked." (Frieda Willett held the position of being their New York set's unimpeachable source of who's-what information.) "Take that pseudo-Perry Como voice of his. That bog-trotter had one solitary professional appearance in Town Hall and all the rest of his musical background is baloney. A Mrs. Wilburton Walker paid for the concert, which politely flopped, and Frieda says that this only made Mrs. Walker more motherly than before. Until her money was gone—lost in investments made for her by sonny boy Bruce. Then Bruce was gone."

Lily said obliquely, "Angela, have you never thought of love as a one-sided racket. Isn't it most often that way?"

"I've never thought about love at all. If you have to, it isn't. How much has he lifted from you to date? Or aren't you talking?"

"He's lifted nothing—not a dime."

"Apart from the fact that I don't believe it, how many times has he braced you for a loan?"

"Twice."

"Well?"

"I refused."

"Ah, well—goodbye Bruce. Or do you intend to marry him?"

"He's asked me to. I said I'd answer after we knew each other better."

"He'll never wait. That buzzard is after cash on the line. When he's certain that he can't get it from you, he'll move over to where he can."

"Why do I put up with you, Angela, dear?"

"Because you need me. Like a gyroscope, to keep you on an even keel."

The compound labeled chloral hydrate is a colorless crystalline substance with a slightly aromatic odor and a bitter taste. Taken in alcohol its action is so rapid that it has been given the name of knockout drops, and it is highly

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regarded as an article of standard equipment along any clip-joint row. For a price, a good customer —one who is palsy-walsy with the bartender—can acquire a modest amount of it for his personal devices.

"Lily, I've never shown you the pictures of my family," Bruce said as they drove under a midnight moon. "My mother, my Dad, my sister Eleanor—would you care to see them?"

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"They're at your place, I suppose?"

"Yes—and I promise you, Lily, they're not etchings."

"They'd better not be. All right, I'd like to see them, Bruce."

The mother was motherly in a sort of off-Whistler way, Dad was a cross between a Man of Distinction and a minister in mufti, whereas sister Eleanor looked intelligently sweet. It was a sterling collection, and Bruce had spent a good deal of time and judgment at the studio of a portrait-photographer buddy in picking them out.

"I took them myself, with my little Graflex."

"You're a talent, Bruce. They're very professional."

"Merely a hobby. I want you to meet them in person, Lily. I'm arranging for them to come down and spend a week here after Christmas."

He mixed gin-and-tonics and gave her one.

"Salud!"

"Salud!"

Shortly after sunup Lily came to.

Orientation was difficult because of the vicious nausea that seemed to inundate her. She felt tantalizingly close to death.

"Try this black coffee," Bruce said.

The furnishings of the room came identifiably into focus, including the couch she was stretched out on. She managed to sit up.

"We're still here."

"That's right, Lily."

"What time is it?"

"Half-past six."

"I passed out. I don't see why? We had hardly anything before coming here. Then nothing but that one gin-and-tonic. Why the blackout, Bruce?"

"Was it?"

"I don't get you."

"Possibly in a few months, Lily, you will."

It took a while for this to sink in, and a stifled, ripping anger was Lily's first reaction—a very different reaction from that single other time when, in her gullible 'teens, she had been trapped with Chuck Davis in the chemistry of unbearable desire.

"So-that's it," she said.

"Could be."

"*Tell* me, Bruce. Is it, or isn't it?"

Bruce poured black coffee.

"Get some more of this under

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your belt," he said, holding it out.

Lily didn't want coffee. She wanted air. She insisted on their taking the car and talking it over. Bruce drove. He headed for one of the narrower, secondary roads going west.

"I've been thinking," Lily said. "I'm not going to take any chances—I've heard of too many fatal cases. It happened to a friend of mine and now she's dead. I am going to marry you, and after it's over my lawyer will arrange a divorce."

"No."

"Don't be a fool, Bruce. Mr. Hartwell can arrange anything."

"I don't mean about a divorce. I mean, Lily, that I'm not going to marry you."

"I don't see why not? You've already asked me to."

"Since then I've been able to observe a few things, Lily. Principally your well bred but hammerlock clutch on the family loot."

Lily thought this over for several miles.

"I see."

"Do you, Lily?"

"As Angela put it, you want cash on the line."

"Plenty."

"I suppose you took photographs with your little Graflex? That's simply required procedure, isn't it, in a deal like this?"

"So they say."

"Well, you'll get nothing from me, Bruce. Not one cent."

"No?"

"No." Lily added, as if it settled everything, "I loved you."

Softly, almost mockingly from between ripe lips, the singing came *—I love you truly, truly dear—*

Lily reached her foot over and pressed the brake.

"Get out."

"Sorry—my one allergy, walking."

He kicked her foot aside and increased the speed of the car.

"Stop it, you idiot! You're hitting nearly eighty."

When the crash against the telephone pole came, Lily was thrown clear—shot hurtling into the hyacinth-smothered waters of a canal that bordered the road. In her brief passage through the air she lost her shoes. Except for the smack of impact on the canal's surface, she suffered no further damage.

In the corridor outside the room where Bruce lay at Memorial, Lily said to Dr. Stuyvesant, "Well, Doctor?"

"Miss Davidson, I—my consultants—we have done what we can. I won't go into the case clinically, but Mr. James's condition is extremely grave."

"Be frank, please."

Dr. Stuyvesant shrugged. He studied the intense, the curious absorption of Lily's expression. Grief? Scarcely. Was it—could it be—impossible! Hate?

"There is," he said, "no hope."

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"How long?"

"That is impossible to predict. Probably tonight, towards morning."

"Definitely, he is beyond help?"

"Yes."

"Is he conscious?"

"At times."

"Have you taken a blood test, Doctor?"

"Naturally."

"Could you take one now, of me?"

"Of course, but may I ask why?"

"Because I understand that Florida law requires them before a marriage."

Angela Stutz, under pressure, made the arrangements.

"Lily," she had asked, almost wildly, "why?"

"It's a precaution. Just in case."

"Regardless of anything, Lily, Bruce is a dying man. You'll simply be marrying a corpse."

"Do you suppose I would marry him otherwise?"

Angela was shocked at the expression on Lily's face.

"You hate him."

"Hate? I loathe him."

"Then what earthly good, Lily?"

Lily's voice was as cold as her eyes.

"Apart from my main reason, I shall, as his widow, have charge of his effects."

Under the firm conviction that her friend and employer had gone temporarily demented, Angela attended to the technicalities. Influence of the Davidson wealth, a properly softened surrogate, waivers —all these greased the job through by late afternoon, effacing the legally required three days wait. Lily took the license to Memorial during a period when she was advised by telephone that Bruce was conscious. Angela was to follow, after picking up a Justice of the Peace.

Lily asked the nurse to leave them alone.

She drew a chair beside the bed, and the pale fringe of her deep detestation reached an aura of chill over Bruce's body from which life, in painful leisure, was ebbing away.

His voice was astral in its calm detachment.

"Don't hate me, Lily. There's no need to any longer."

"They've told you?"

"Oh, yes. Bell, book, and candle."

"I want you to sign this, Bruce."

"Marriage license? Dr. Stuyvesant told me about your taking the blood test. He offered his congratulations."

"You will go through with it, won't you, Bruce?"

"Why not? Why not anything, now?"

"Where are the pictures?"

"Still in the Graflex, Lily."

"Where is the Graflex?"

"In the oven in the kitchenette."

Consciousness lasted through the taking of the vows. Coma followed. Deep. Complete.

"Will you be staying here to-

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night, Mrs. James?" Dr. Stuyvesant asked. "We can arrange a room."

"No, Doctor, but thank you. Will my husband wake from this coma?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it very much."

"You will have someone telephone?"

"Yes."

Before driving home Lily stopped at Bruce's apartment, used the key he had given her, took the Graflex from the oven, and burned the film pack in a flash celluloid fire in the bathtub.

The night passed. Occasionally, Lily slept. At seven o'clock in the morning the telephone rang.

"This is Dr. Stuyvesant, Mrs. James."

"Yes, Doctor? Is it over?"

"This will come as a shock to you, but a joyful one. I could almost say that a miracle has occurred. Of course, he will never be the same man that he was before, but your husband is going to live, Mrs. James."

Item in the *Halycyon Surf-Tattler* under the byline of Ethel Smith, Society Editor: The Bruce Jameses have decided not to close their beach house, 2764 Royal Palm Drive, at the end of the present season. Lily tells us that Bruce is convalescing so satisfactorily from the automobile smashup of a month ago that she feels any change to northern climes would be unwise until her husband's recovery is complete. She plans to stay in residence if necessary throughout the summer. . . .

Toward the end of June one of the seven French poodles got sick.

She was Lily's favorite, Sarah Bernhardt, and when the veterinary said she would have to be put away, Lily said she would attend to it herself, rather than have it done in the impersonal strangeness of Dr. Swiberg's animal clinic. Sarah Bernhardt would die at home. Dr. Swiberg, thoroughly familiar with and resigned to the oddities of animal lovers, gave Lily a six-ounce bottle of chloroform and the proper instructions, and Lily, helped by Angela Stutz and Bruce, carried out the instructions.

Three ounces of the chloroform were used, soaked on a sponge and pressed over Sarah Bernhardt's nose. Three ounces were left.

Apart from its use as an anesthetic, or as a means of painless departure for pets into the animal Nirvana, there is this about chloroform. In composition, it is a clear, colorless, volatile liquid, having a characteristic aromatic odor and a sharp taste. If the liquid is swallowed by an adult (in contradistinction to inhalation), death by respiratory paralysis may occur in a few minutes, although occasionally some cases survive a few hours or days. When swallowed, one ounce is usually a fatal dose.

Shortly after the rather eccentric burial of Sarah Bernhardt (the

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other six French poodles performed their several clever tricks as a parting salute around the grave), Angela Stutz left for a month's vacation in Michigan with her folks, reducing the social triangle in the household to two. In her forthright and not unkindly fashion Angela had acted as a buffer, and with her gone, there was an adhesion of awareness between Lily and Bruce that did not exist when Angela was around.

"Why don't you divorce me, Lily?" Bruce once said. "You must know by now that nothing's going to happen."

"Yes, I've checked."

"Then what are you waiting for? You hate my guts more completely than any hatred I have ever known."

"No more than you hate mine."

"Possibly so. So again, why the delay?"

Lily said furiously, "Can you imagine what people would say? Chucking you out flat in the condition you're in?"

"Well, it's an angle. I hadn't thought of that."

"I've even removed the stigma of any talk that I bought you and am keeping you. I did that yesterday, Bruce."

"Did what, Lily?"

"Made you financially independent. I've settled an annuity on you. You're good for fifty thousand a year, Bruce, for as long as you live. Even after we're divorced you'll continue to get it—till you die."

"A neat sum, Lily, and thank you very much. But why? I mean *truly* why?"

She said again, as she had said once before, "I loved you."

Exactly when Lily came to the conclusion that Bruce intended to kill her, Lily did not know. It was a gradual conclusion rather than one reached decisively in a lump, and its various antennae signaled her in several ways. Periods of deep brooding and an air of melancholia were the stormy petrels of Bruce's mental state, but the climax to her mounting conviction came when the bottle of chloroform, with its three remaining ounces, was gone from the shelf in the storeroom where Lily herself had put it.

She went to the public library and spent a quarter of an hour in the reading room with a book on toxicology. She familiarized herself with the lethal qualities inherent in chloroform. It both surprised and rather chilled her to learn that the liquid was just as deadly when swallowed as when inhaled.

"I have devised a new cocktail, Lily," Bruce said before dinner, several evenings later.

"Deadly?"

He smiled back at her whitely.

"In its fashion. I call it Happy Ending."

They were in the Florida room where a panorama of the sea, evening sky, and palms, all in dark

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fantasia, spread beyond the bank of jalousies. Bruce moved to a cellarette and his back interposed as a screen while his hands were busy with bottles and a shaker.

"The name is a paradox," Lily said. "All endings are notoriously sad."

"No, not necessarily so. Would you say that the Christian martyrs were saddened by an ending to their torture by the lions?"

"The example is extreme, Bruce. Anyhow, that sort of inhumanity no longer exists."

"Doesn't it, Lily?"

He was facing her now and coming toward the coffee table, carrying a double-cocktail glass in each hand. Her eyes clung to their separate gleams of slender crystal.

"You may be right, Bruce. It possibly does still exist at that."

He placed one glass before her, the other on the side near his chair.

"Are there any cashews, Bruce?"

"I think so."

"Would you, please?"

His back was once more toward her as he retraced with the patience of the convalescent some fourteen steps to the cellarette, and during this passage Lily's fingers were uncertain in tremor as she exchanged her cocktail glass for his, but no drop spilled.

Bruce returned with a silver saucer filled with cashew nuts and set it on the table.

"Salud!"

"Salud!"

Death, Lily remembered from the book on toxicology, *by respiratory paralysis may occur in a few minutes, although occasionally some cases survive a few hours or days.*

"Does philosophy bore you, Lily?"

"No, not especially. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"About what?"

"About the alchemy of change in a human soul."

"Isn't that a rather fancy way of referring to the leopard and his spots? I thought any change along that line was considered impossible."

Lily placed her empty glass on the table, while Bruce continued with a slow-paced sipping from his, its contents, a delicate amber in hue, half gone.

"I think," he said, "that that old wheeze is all wet. It's a question of circumstance. There is a catalectic process, Lily, when you're faced with death."

"As when you were? In Memorial?"

"Yes."

"And I think you've been concealing a Ph.D."

"We've both been concealing a lot from each other, Lily."

"Just what is a catalectic process?"

"It relates to exchange. In my case, during those hours of no hope, the bad things in me were supplanted by the good. Want a refill?"

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"Thank you, no."

Bruce finished his drink and set the empty glass beside hers on the table.

"I can tell you now," he said.

Soon, she recalled, *there will be a flushing of the face, a rapid pulse and quickened respiration. In this stage,* the book had explained, *death may occur from a reflex stopping of the heart.*

"There never were any pictures, Lily, and you slept undisturbed."

She forced her voice to coldness.

"Their threat of blackmail still remained."

"Until the catalectic process of exchange. Not beyond."

"I wish you could prove that," Lily said, thinking there might still be time, while remembered fragments of the proper antidotal treatment swirled with peculiar laziness in her head.

"I have proved it."

She felt an intense, an imperative urgency to know the truth—whether or not Bruce had truly changed, whether or not the spots were gone.

"What proof? How?"

"I laced my drink with chloroform."

"Your drink?"

"Yes, and if you'll permit me one last moment of bathos, this bummed-up carcass, this mirror for your hate, now leaves the scene."

"*Your* drink, Bruce?"

He observed with an illuminating flare of horror the sudden flush that turned her cheeks to carmine, and her breathing that shallowly rippled in acceleration. He shoved the table to one side and caught her up close.

"You changed the glasses!"

Lily did not, because she could not, answer.

His cry of "Lily!" rang throughout the house.

A few moments later he said into the dead shell of her ear, "I loved you, too."

NEXT MONTH . . .

A former show girl's "suicide" —

GEORGE HARMON COXE's *A Routine Night's Work*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

a new story by

AUTHOR: **CLAYTON RAWSON**

TITLE: ***Miracles — All in the Day's Work***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: The Great Merlini

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Inspector Gavigan was going to Maine on a fishing trip, Merlini was going to Jones Beach to have 60 beautiful girls dive into a swimming pool and then vanish—when an "impossible crime" stopped them both . . .*

LIEUTENANT DORAN OF THE HOMICIDE Squad nearly collided head-on with The Great Merlini in the doorway of the latter's place of business. Doran was on his way in; the proprietor of the Magic Shop—slogan: Nothing Is Impossible—was on his way out.

"Where," Doran asked, "are you going?"

"Jones Beach," the magician answered. "I've got to show a man how to have sixty beautiful girls dive into a swimming pool and then vanish — underwater."

"I'm glad it's nothing important," Doran said, not believing a word of it. "You're coming with me."

The Great Merlini shook his head. "If you knew the man I'm talking about, you wouldn't say that so calmly. He's the producer of the Marine Theater water show. He is also a boy genius as temperamental as any six Grand Opera stars, and he has already blown his

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top twice this morning because I'm late."

"A boy *genius?* And he thinks you can make sixty girls disappear underwater?"

Merlini grinned. "Nothing hard about that. What he doesn't know, being a *boy* genius, is that this underwater mass vanishing act was done three times daily at the old Hippodrome fifty years ago. The chorus line walked four abreast down a flight of steps into the big tank and never came up. All I have to do is give him the same gimmick."

"You can give it to him later. My orders are to bring you over to the Chancellor Building fast. Inspector Gavigan, who can blow his top higher than any six boy geniuses, has a job for you that nobody ever did at the Hippodrome. What we got is a murderer who just vanished into thin air—sixty-four stories up!"

The theatrical genius had to wait; Doran's next statement fixed that. "The murder was committed right under the Inspector's nose. He was there when it happened. So now we got the precinct Captain who's carrying the case firing questions at Gavigan—questions he can't answer. Neither of them are enjoying this. And when the Commissioner gets a load of it—and the newspapers . . ." Doran choked. The prospect was too devastating.

Ten minutes later Doran and Merlini entered the sixty-fourth floor offices of the Hi-Fly Rod & Reel Company. The reception room was like a thousand others except that its decor was extremely fishy. On one wall hung a stuffed, mounted, five-foot marlin. This somewhat incredible specimen of the taxidermist's art seemed to have just leaped from the briny deep and now, back arched, mouth open hungrily, and with a mean look in its glassy eyes, was diving with murderous intent down at Gavigan who stood just below. Gavigan's eyes also had a glassy look.

The Inspector faced the reception desk and glared at the young lady who sat there. Rosabelle Polchek, who usually answered to "Rosie" and who was known among the salesmen as "The Dish," wore a tight blue sweater, a platinum-blonde rinse, and a harassed look. Her mascara was smudged and her nose was red.

"I know," Gavigan was saying, "that you want to go home. I know you've had a shock. I know you've answered these questions half a dozen times. But we're going through it again—and again—until it begins to make sense. You opened this office at nine o'clock. Now take it from there."

Rosie blew her nose into a damp handkerchief. "I opened the mail and put the letters Mr. Courtney would want on his desk. I was changing my typewriter ribbon when he came in."

"Time?"

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"Nine thirty. And I knew right away that today was going to be a tough one. Instead of 'Hi, Rosie, how's The Dish this morning?' I get 'Phone Joe McCall and tell him to get the hell over here fast. Toledo says that last shipment of Winchester reel casings was defective.'"

A dapper young man who sat nervously on a chair in the corner angrily squashed a cigarette in the ashtray beside him, burned his thumb, swore, and said, "Winchester Fishing Supply doesn't manufacture defective—"

Gavigan snapped at him. "Quiet! I'll get to you. Go on, Miss Polchek."

Rosie dabbed at her nose again. "Harry—I mean Mr. Courtney—went into his office and I called Joe. Then a minute or so later this Humphrey Bogart type character with the dead-pan face and the Panama hat breezed in. Said his name was J. J. Hartman and that Mr. Courtney was expecting him. So I flashed the boss and he said send him in, which I did."

"Now," Gavigan said slowly, "let's get this absolutely straight. He walked through the door there next to your desk and straight into Courtney's office? And you haven't seen him since?"

Rosie nodded. "That's right."

"And you didn't make a trip to the Ladies Room or go out for a coffee break?"

"I was right here every second. Besides, there wasn't time. Two minutes later you walked in."

Gavigan turned to Merlini. "This morning I started on the first vacation I've had in three years. And I had to make the mistake of stopping in here on my way to Grand Central and a train for the Maine woods. Courtney and I get together now and then to talk fish and I've got a nice collection of flies he helped me collect which I never get a chance to use. I should have known better. All a police inspector has to do is get set for a vacation and there's a murder, a gang war, a police department shakeup, or somebody throws a bomb at the mayor." He turned back to Rosie. "Go on."

"Then Joe came in."

"No. Don't skip. I want everything—every little detail. I asked for Courtney and then what?"

"I—I said he had someone with him and asked you to wait. You said you had a train to catch, so—" Rosie blew her nose again.

"So you rang Courtney."

Rosie nodded. "He said he'd be free in a few minutes, and you sat down and—and you know everything else that happened. You were right here all the time."

Gavigan scowled at her. "If I knew everything that happened I wouldn't be here now." He turned to Merlini. "For the next ten minutes I read a copy of *Field and Stream*, and Rosie did a pruning and filing job on her nails. Then

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McCall here blew in and tried to find out what Courtney was all steamed up about. Rosie said she didn't know, that Courtney was really burned, and advised McCall to sit tight and wait, which he didn't want to do."

"I was in a hurry," McCall said. "I had another appointment at ten —an important one. But I also had to find out what was eating Courtney. I didn't want to lose the account."

"So he sat down," Gavigan continued, "and fidgeted. Rosie finished doing her nails and then phoned a girl friend and they had an important business conference about a movie on last night's Late Show starring Bathsheba and Victor Mature. And just as this started, Courtney also got a phone call. We heard his phone ring twice, then cut off in the middle of the third ring as he picked it up."

Merlini eyed the PBX unit on Rosie's desk. "She took the call and put it through to her boss?"

"No. His call didn't come through the board. Courtney has two phones, the second is an outside line and the call came in on that. Then, after about the second reel of Rosie's movie synopsis, I began to suspect that maybe she had also stayed up to see Richard Barthelmess or Rudolph Valentino on the Late Late Show and I might miss my train. So I stood up and looked impatient.

"Rosie got the idea and cut her call short. I told her I had to go and would see Courtney later. I started for the door. She stopped me. 'I nearly forgot,' she said, and she fished in a desk drawer and came up with a little beauty of a spinning reel."

Gavigan took it from his jacket pocket. "Complete with a hundred yards of a new type nylon line. She said Courtney had asked her to give it to me if I stopped in when she was out. I thanked her and started for the door again . . ."

"And," McCall put in, "I told her I couldn't wait any longer and I started to go out, too."

"And I," Rosie added, "know Mr. Courtney isn't going to like it if Joe leaves, so I ask him to wait and I ring the boss." She flicked a key on her board and a phone rang beyond the closed office door. "He didn't answer, so I tried again." This time Rosie held the key down longer and the phone in the next office rang insistently.

"Still no answer," Gavigan said. "And that's where I made my mistake. I'd be halfway to Boston by now if I had kept going, but I didn't. I came back. And Rosie, who also figured something might be wrong, got up, opened Courtney's door—and screamed."

The Inspector walked to the door, opened it, and told a fingerprint man, a police photographer, and two detectives to wait outside. Then, as Merlini joined him, he said:

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"This is what she saw."

There was a window in the opposite wall beyond which lay a magnificent although dizzying view of Manhattan; beside the window was a desk whose top proclaimed that Rosie's boss had been the executive type. It held a desk blotter, the morning mail stacked neatly in its center, six sharpened pencils, an onyx pen set, a framed photograph of Mrs. Courtney, and two telephones.

The businesslike efficiency of the desk top was marred by the fact that Courtney, a fortyish, rather handsome man, still seated in his chair, had fallen forward. His left hand still grasped one of the telephone receivers and his face rested on the blotter. The onyx handle of a paper knife that matched his pen set projected squarely from the center of his back.

Gavigan pointed to the phone in Courtney's hand. "I came in here about five minutes after we heard him answer that phone. During that time, while Courtney was still talking, Panama Harry picked up the knife and let him have it."

"Panama Harry?" Merlini asked.

"Didn't that description Rosie gave mean anything to you?" Doran asked a bit incredulously. "Don't you read the newspapers?"

"I don't always read the crime news," Merlini admitted. "Too often it's not news—just the same old story with a different cast of characters."

"I could do with a lot less of the kind of news Panama Harry makes," Doran growled. "He claims no prison can hold him and he got out of his third one last week. He was one of three cons who engineered a break out of Sing Sing. He's been on all the front pages—with pictures."

"And with every cop in six states looking for him," Gavigan added, "He has the nerve to walk in here and knife Courtney. Either he just doesn't give a damn or he's stir crazy."

"Or," Merlini added, "since he seems to have learned how to vanish as abruptly and completely as a punctured soap bubble he knows he holds all the Aces." The magician pointed with his toe at a large lead fishing sinker that lay on the carpet near the desk. "What's this doing here?"

"Courtney used it as a paperweight," Gavigan said. "If he saw Panama Harry pull a knife he may have grabbed for it in self-defense and knocked it off the desk to the floor. But I doubt it. My guess is Courtney was stabbed from behind while he was talking on the phone. And Doc Peabody says he died almost instantly."

Merlini walked to a leather-covered sofa along one wall and looked down at the Panama hat that lay there. "Panama's prints are on file, of course. Find any on this that match?"

"Nothing useful. Handling a hat

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is an automatic action that is almost always done the same way, so all we got was a hopeless mess of superimposed prints."

Merlini surveyed the rest of the room. "Smooth plaster walls and ceiling. Nothing to hide a secret exit. Have you had the carpet up?"

"Would the Chancellor Building architects have put trapdoors in their plans?"

"I doubt it, but Courtney could have made alterations. Did you look?"

"We looked. And . . ."

". . . didn't find one," Merlini finished. "If you had, you wouldn't have sent Doran to get me." Merlini crossed to the window. "This was unlocked?"

Doran answered. "Who locks a window this far off the ground? And what difference does it make anyway?"

Merlini raised the window, put his head out, and looked down—a sheer drop of sixty-four stories, and no ledges.

Behind him Gavigan said, "Three witnesses, including myself, will testify that no one left this room by the door—the only door. Unless you can come up with something else, it has to be the window."

Merlini pulled his head in. "Then we'll have to come up with something else. I doubt if he had a helicopter waiting outside. This time of day it would be a trifle conspicuous." He eyed the room frowning. "Panama Harry is in the wrong business. As a vanishing man I could get him night-club bookings for two years solid." He crossed to the desk. "Why are you so sure it was this outside phone, the one Courtney is holding, that you heard ring, Gavigan? How do you know it wasn't the other? Rosie could have rung that from the board."

"Not without three hands, she couldn't. When Courtney's phone rang, she had just started on her nonstop movie synopsis. She had her phone in her left hand and was still waving her right hand to dry the nail polish. After the second ring she swiveled around in her chair looking toward Courtney's door as if wondering why he didn't answer. Her elbow knocked the bottle of nail polish off onto the floor, and she was picking that up when the phone rang again and then cut off as Courtney answered. Then, still talking, she put her polishing equipment away in a desk drawer that contains a wide assortment of bottled beauty preparations, face powder, facial tissues, bobby pins, lipstick, and a couple of paper clips that must have got there by mistake. Does that answer your question?"

Merlini, who had found a salesman's sample case on a filing cabinet in one corner of the room, had opened it and was contemplating an assortment of Hi-Fly products. "It does," he said, crossing to the desk and looking down at Courtney's body. "The hand really

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isn't quicker than the eye. Magicians have been telling audiences that for years to mislead them—to hide the fact that most of their miracles are the result of some form of psychological doublecross. The spectators are led to believe that something had happened which, in fact, did not happen. We seem to be faced with a vanishing man. Suppose we assume there is no such animal and work backwards looking for the twist in logic that misled us."

"He couldn't have left by the window," Gavigan said. "He didn't go out by the door. And he's not here. What's twisted about that?"

"Maybe nothing. But when you add those facts up and conclude that Panama Harry vanished like so much smoke, perhaps your arithmetic is wrong. What if that set of facts has two possible answers and you don't see one because the other is so obvious and so startling?"

"You've got another answer?" Doran asked.

"I can think of one," Merlini replied. "The facts you've just listed could also mean that Panama Harry was never in this room at all. What have we got that says he was? The hat? How do we know it isn't Courtney's, or one that some absent-minded visitor left behind? We also have Rosie's testimony. But which is more likely—a vanishing man or a lying witness?"

The Inspector scowled. "We also have Courtney. He's not lying. He's not just pretending to be dead. Somebody here in this room killed him. He didn't do it himself — not with that knife where it is in the middle of his back."

"Oh, it's murder all right," Merlini admitted. "But what if the murderer vanished by leaving earlier—before there were any witnesses to see him go?"

Gavigan thought about that a moment, then said, "You mean that Courtney was already dead when I got here?"

"Why not? At least that's easier to believe than the vanishing man."

"Is it?" Gavigan asked skeptically. "It leaves you with something just as impossible." He pointed to the phone receiver in Courtney's dead hand. "Now you've got a *dead man answering a phone*."

Merlini grinned. "I know. But that may be an easier miracle to perform than the other. Suppose he should do it again?"

Under his breath Doran groaned. "Now we got a zombie!"

"Do you mean," Gavigan wanted to know, "that you can make Courtney answer a phone now — two hours after Doc Peabody declared him dead?"

"I can try." Merlini pointed to the phone. "Lieutenant, put that receiver back on the cradle and let's see what happens on an incoming call."

Doran simply looked at him. Then the Inspector said, "Okay, Doran, do it."

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The Lieutenant moved, rather like a zombie himself. He loosened the dead fingers, removed the phone, and placed it on the cradle. "If you think Doc Peabody is talking through his hat and that Courtney isn't . . ."

"Oh, he's dead all right," Merlini said. "Let's go outside."

He turned and went into a reception room. Gavigan scowled, hesitated, then followed. So did Doran.

Across the room the fingerprint man had laid out his equipment on the magazine table and was now taking Rosie's prints. McCall watched glumly.

Merlini said, "Let's go back a bit. Courtney, still alive, is in his office when the murderer goes in. I'll play the part of the murderer. And you—" he looked at Gavigan and Doran—"both of you stay here and keep your eyes and ears open." Then quickly, before they could object, he moved past them, back into Courtney's office, and closed the door.

Doran took a step forward, but the Inspector stopped him. "He's got something up his sleeve. Or he thinks he has. I want to see it."

"I'm not so sure I do," Doran muttered. "Not if he does what he says he's going to do."

The door opened again a moment later. "I have," Merlini announced, "just killed Courtney. And I leave the office by this door. Unseen because certain witnesses aren't here."

Merlini sat in Rosie's chair behind the receptionist's desk. "Now we skip a bit and I take over Rosie's part." He opened a desk drawer, closed it, opened another, and brought forth a bottle of nail polish which he placed on the desk. "I have just finished doing my nails." He turned to the switchboard and picked up the phone.

"Rosie then phoned a girl friend." He began to dial. "I'll phone my boy-genius producer and tell him I've been detained by a vanishing man. That'll really make him blow his top." Then, into the phone, he said, "Merlini here. Is your boss in? I want to . . ."

He stopped short and looked up at Gavigan who was staring at the closed door to Courtney's office. From beyond it came the sound of a telephone ringing.

Merlini swiveled in his chair. His elbow struck the nail polish bottle, knocking it to the floor.

Inspector Gavigan started forward.

The phone rang a third time—then stopped in mid-ring.

Silence.

"Dead man," Merlini said slowly, "do sometimes answer—"

Gavigan jerked the door open. Close behind him Doran stared over his shoulder.

Courtney's body, as far as they could tell, had not moved. *But the receiver was now back in Courtney's hand!*

Doran turned to Merlini. "Okay,"

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he said, "let's have it. How did you get that receiver off the cradle and into his hand?"

"He put it there," Gavigan said slowly, "while he was in there for a moment with the door closed. And when he pretended to dial the boy genius he actually dialed Courtney's outside phone."

"But," Doran objected, "Courtney's phone wouldn't ring with the receiver off the cradle."

Merlini got to his feet and went through the door. "It would," he said, "if there was something *else* on the cradle." The lead sinker now lay on the edge of the desk. Merlini placed it on the phone cradle. "It will ring now."

"And it would go on ringing as long as the sinker is there or until you hung up." Doran looked at the switchboard phone lying on Rosie's desk where Merlini had left it. "But you didn't hang up."

"There is," Merlini said, "more than one way to skin a cat." He returned to the switchboard, clicked the hook, and dialed again. And again Courtney's phone rang.

"Hocus pocus," Merlini said, "Abracadabra!"

The phone rang a second time, then started to ring once more. What happened in the middle of the ring was almost as startling as though the dead man had moved. The lead sinker jerked suddenly with a life of its own, jumped off the phone, rolled to the edge of the desk, and fell to the floor.

The ringing stopped.

For a moment Gavigan and Doran simply stared. Then Gavigan moved, striding across the room. He picked up the weight and examined it. This got him nowhere. It was just a lead weight.

"Okay," he said. "I give up. How did you manage that—from the other room?"

"It may," Merlini said, "be just about the oldest trick in magic. Far older than the girls vanishing underwater at the Hippodrome. It probably dates from the days of the witch doctor and medicine man. And the modern form of the gimmick is one the Hi-Fly Rod and Reel Company sells."

Merlini took the sinker from Gavigan, then knelt and picked up something from the floor that was nearly invisible against the beige carpet.

"Fishline," he said. He wrapped its end several times around the sinker and placed the sinker back on the phone cradle. "It crosses the room and goes out under the door to a reel in Rosie's bottom desk drawer. She knocked the nail polish bottle off her desk purposely—an excuse to reach down behind the desk, yank the line, and dislodge the sinker."

Merlini gave the line a jerk; the weight fell from the phone cradle. "Not being tied, it came loose, and under cover of putting away the rest of her polishing equipment, she reeled it in."

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"Okay," Gavigan said, "that wraps it up. After she killed Courtney, she set the fishline-sinker gimmick, then phoned McCall and got him over here as a witness to testify that she was sitting innocently at her desk when Courtney was killed."

"And your arrival," Merlini added, "gave her an unexpected and even better witness to her innocence."

Doran scowled thoughtfully at Merlini. "When you pretended just now to call your boy genius you actually dialed Courtney's outside phone instead. And Rosie's phone call to her girl friend was also phony."

Merlini nodded. "Just the sort of telephone trickery that a switchboard operator would dream up. She made one phone call appear to be two. Her outgoing call to a phantom girl friend and Courtney's incoming call from a mysterious stranger were one and the same. Her description of the movie she had seen was a report to a dead man."

"And then," Doran added, "Rosie the Dish dished up Panama Harry as a red herring. Since he's on the lam he's not likely to come forward and deny her story."

"And who," Merlini asked, "would believe him if he did?"

"But there's one thing the D.A. isn't going to like," the Lieutenant said dubiously. "You've pinned this on the person with the least motive. One of the boys reported that Mrs. Courtney got a divorce decree in Reno last week, and that Rosie told a girl friend that she was in line to marry her boss. Why, just when his wife steps out of the picture, dose she want him out, too?"

"She might," Merlini said, "if she discovered that his promise to make an honest woman out of her was one he didn't intend to keep."

"We'll find that out right now," Gavigan said. "When she sees this alibi of hers fall apart she'll talk. Doran, tell the photographer I want pictures of that casting reel in her desk drawer. It's Exhibit A."

"Wait, Inspector," Merlini said. "That would be the wrong picture. She pulled another cute one—an impromptu stunt that may be unique in the annals of the Police Department. At least, I never heard of another murderer who gave Exhibit A to a Police Inspector hoping he'd take it away from the scene of the crime off to the wilds of Maine. The reel in her desk is one I found in the sample case there on the files. The one she really used..."

Gavigan took the spinning reel from his pocket and glared at it.

"If I ever do get that vacation," he growled, "I'm going to spend it on a desert in Arizona. Somehow I don't feel much like fishing."

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A strange story by the author of THE CONTENT ASSIGNMENT, THE CRIMSON IN THE PURPLE, *and* SHADOW OF A LADY

THEY DIDN'T DESERVE HER DEATH

by HOLLY ROTH

"THERE—" BEN PARKINS SAID, PRESUMABLY to his wife and mother, although he seemed to be addressing the car's windshield—"is Sitges." He waved his hand in a try at lordly contempt. "On your right, *the* golf course. On your left, *the* hotel. Ahead, *the* Mediterranean." His constant state of half-suppressed fury rode volcanically beneath the words, and the theatrical sweep of his arm missed its intent and resembled a swing at an unseen enemy.

Huddled in the corner behind him, trying to escape the wind off the sea and her own frightening exhaustion, his mother thought tiredly that his fury was aggravated by the fact that he could not face its cause. At least, she presumed he did not admit it, even to himself. Although it was quite possible that Alice, who was stupid, avaricious, and entirely without emotion or subtlety, might have brought it crashingly home to him. Yes, it was quite possible that Alice had so often said to him, "Why doesn't your mother die, for goodness' sakes?" that he had come to acknowledge the hope. For his sake, she hoped that wasn't true. It would be a terrible thing to live with.

He said, "Of course, down that street on our left there is undoubtedly a village—couple of crummy *bodegas,* a few dirty cafés."

Mrs. Parkins said nothing. She had been far too tired to drive the twenty miles to Sitges, but if she had asked to be left in bed in the hotel in Barcelona, Ben would have refused to make the excursion.

Alice spoke up in the flat nasal voice that—for Mrs. Parkins, at least—would have canceled out her beauty if her facial expressions hadn't already negated it. She had two expressions: blankness and the cupidity that occasionally displaced it. Alice said, "For goodness' sakes, let's get out and stretch."

Ben turned his profile toward the rear of the car. "Mother?"

"Please"—Mrs. Parkins tried to keep the pleading note out of her voice— "you two take a walk. I am enjoying just sitting here."

She thought he would refuse, but instead he threw his door so wide that the hinges squealed in protest.

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When she was alone, a particle of peace descended on Mrs. Parkins. She slid lower in her seat and let her head drop back against the upholstery. She was a tiny woman and her frailness made her seem even smaller.

She could see no way out. She would give them the money if she could—but John had left her only the income; the principle would go to Ben when she died. There was enough income, it seemed to her, to support a dozen people, but Alice's demands more than equaled those of a dozen people. She supposed that, in addition, Ben was deeply in debt. On his "expectations," she thought, with a distaste that had nothing personal in it; it was simply a self-destroying way for a man to exist. She hadn't wanted to come to Spain, and the doctor, after a horrified look at the electrocardiogram, had thrown up his hands in despair. But Alice wanted to make the trip and Ben, with that remnant of conscience that made everything so much worse for the three of them, refused to leave unless Mother would go too. "After all, it's Mother's money."

Those bitter revelations of how he was being eaten up inside always wrung her heart.

She wished she *would* die . . . Then a moment's revolt flooded over her. They didn't deserve her death; she could not believe that God's world was so ordered that the wicked and the greedy and the heartless would prosper.

She felt a stab in her side; it crescendoed. She slid still lower and gave in to the wave of pain. There seemed to be a hope of peace just over the crest . . .

Alice draped her magnificent figure on the low sea wall, looked out at the rippling Mediterranean with enormous eyes of a glowing purple that rivaled the amethyst of the beautiful sea, and said, "For goodness' sakes, why won't your mother *die?*"

"Alice!" Ben choked, and then grew red as the volcano seething within him threatened to erupt.

She turned the blank purple eyes on him. "Ben, be sensible. She's *old,* and if you don't pay some of those bills soon, you're going to be in trouble. Can't you borrow some money?"

"I have borrowed, as you well know." She shrugged and looked back at the sea. "And I'll tell you something else." He hesitated; if Alice ever got the idea that hanging on wasn't going to pay, she would leave him instantly. But fury drove him on. "I haven't been able to borrow from — reputable places, like banks, because I have no collateral. So the rates are enormous—just plain usury. If I don't pay up soon—in a year at the outside—the interest is going to eat up the principle. The money will all be owed before we get it, or damn near."

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The sensuous figure turned away from the sea and swayed in his direction. "Ben," Alice whispered huskily, "couldn't we—*do* something?"

For a split second his body matched the motion of hers, and then he flung himself violently backward. "Alice, for God's sake!" He stamped toward the car, blindly, like an enraged bull.

Alice followed him. Her face showed no more thought or emotion than usual, but the edge of a decision had started forming in her little mind. She had noticed lately that a tiny bulge was growing around her waist: she had better get on with this business before it was too late.

She arrived at the car's side a minute after Ben. "Where's your mother, for goodness' sakes? I want to go."

"She's here." Ben's face was pressed against the rear window and his voice had an oddly choked quality. "She's on the floor."

"The *floor?* For goodness' . . ." Alice's voice disappeared.

Ben opened the door and bent over. After a minute he straightened, closed the door, and turned around. There were tears in his eyes. "Get in the car." He stepped in on his side and stared through the windshield. He continued to stare for a minute or so after Alice was seated. She didn't rush him; everything would be all right now. She had no decisions to make. She could relax and be glad that the six years hadn't been wasted.

Ben said, "This is a one-horse town. Probably has one cop, who's also chief of police and coroner. If they *have* coroners. If we get involved here, heaven alone knows what'll happen. Might even be accused of murder."

"Any doctor will know—"

"Yeah, but I don't think any doctor will know whether she died now or thirty minutes from now. For that matter, she could have slipped down like that while we were driving and we might not have known it for an hour."

"So?"

"So we're going to drive back to Barcelona and straight to the American consulate." He put the car in gear. "Fast. Hold tight."

The curbs of the narrow Calle Junqueras were, as usual, parked in with cilia-like regularity and completeness. Ben found a place in the Plaza Urquinaona, jerked the car's nose in at the required angle, leaped out, and was halfway to the corner before Alice caught up with him.

"Ben," she said, "wait. Shouldn't you— Won't someone see her?"

"I pulled the lap robe over her back in Sitges. And she was very—very small." He grasped Alice's arm a little too tightly. "Come on."

The consul wasn't in but the

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woman assistant they were referred to was pleasant, sympathetic, and obviously capable. Ben assessed her and then told the flat, exact truth.

When he had finished she said soberly, "May I extend my sympathy? You must be . . ." She dropped it there and became briskly businesslike. "Your handling of the situation was exactly right. I shudder to think of the insanities you'd have been subjected to, especially since you don't speak Spanish. We'll go to the police right now. With me along, at least they won't hold you interminably. But even in Barcelona . . ." She waved a hand, as if the explanation were beyond the realm of words.

"Even in Barcelona—what?" Ben insisted. He had a sense of foreboding—why? he wondered. He hadn't done anything to . . . He shuddered.

The woman looked at him with a misunderstanding sympathy. "It's all right," she said reassuringly. "It's just that they're not very efficient. Lately we've had to deal with a number of thefts, for instance, and not a single thing has been recovered. Infuriating. Well . . ."

In the cramped elevator Ben looked at Alice's face and wished she would show—something. The intelligent woman was standing so inescapably near. But, then, the emotion Alice would display if she were capable . . .

Outside they walked quickly to the corner and when they had rounded it and taken a few steps, Ben stopped abruptly. Then he ran. The two women caught up with him. He looked up from the empty space at the curb with equally empty eyes.

The woman understood instantly. "The car was here? What about the keys?"

"I was in a hurry."

"Of course. Well, I'm afraid—" She paused. "We'll report it immediately. But there have been a half dozen cars stolen lately, and not one was recovered. In this case, they—the thieves—will look in the back and then they'll undoubtedly panic and—and do a very thorough job of disposing . . ." Her voice trailed away. The city squealed and screeched and surged around them, but they were removed from it, caught in an odd silence.

Alice hadn't spoken since they entered the consulate building. Now she said, "But what will happen?"

"Why, we'll go to the police—"

"No, I mean how do we prove—What happens to her—her effects?"

"Oh." The woman swung around to face Alice. "I am a lawyer," she said. "I can assure you there's no need to worry about that. There will be a legal acceptance of death in five year's time. Then her heirs will be—rewarded."

No female's attitude had ever interested Alice. Damn! she thought with enormous bitterness. She had never disliked the old lady, but for

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a vicious moment she wondered if this outcome would have pleased — or seemed right to? — Mrs. Parkins. Well, that didn't matter now. Alice was thirty, and there was that little bulge around her waist. She had no choice but to try all over, and quickly.

Ben read her mind as easily as if the thoughts were reflected in Alice's still face. So that was that. He had a strange feeling of peace. His mother had never really preached at him, but when he was a boy she used to speak, with obvious belief, of God's justice.

"Q"

COMING ATTRACTIONS...

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The chief characters in this story of a wire-tapping investigation (one of Rex Stout's most interesting novelettes) are seven private eyes—including two female detectives! One was Archie's dish, no doubt about it—but was the other Nero Wolfe's? (Shades of THE *Woman!) Anyway, before the case was over there were 48 operatives operating—42 men and six women!*

Can too many dicks spoil the broth?

TOO MANY DETECTIVES

by REX STOUT

I AM AGAINST FEMALE DETECTIVES on principle. It's not always and everywhere a tough game, but most of the time it is, with no room for the friendly feelings and the nice little impulses. So a she-dick must have a good thick hide, which is not a skin I'd love to touch; if she hasn't, she is apt to melt just when a cold eye and hard nerves are called for, and in that case she doesn't belong.

However, there are times when a principle should take a nap, and that was one of them. Of the seven private detectives present in the room, including Nero Wolfe and me, two were women seated in a corner, side by side. Theodolinda (Dol) Bonner, about my age, with home-grown long black lashes making a curling canopy for her caramel-colored eyes, had had her own agency as a licensed detective for some years and was doing all right. She might have got her well-cut and well-hung brown tweed suit at Bergdorf's, and possibly the mink jacket too. I had seen her before, but I knew the name of the other one, Sally Colt, only because the members of the little gathering had exchanged names and greetings at the suggestion of Jay Kerr.

I left my chair, crossed to the corner, got upturned eyes, and spoke. "Miss Colt? I don't know if you caught my name. Archie Goodwin."

"Yes, of course," she said. Her skin didn't look thick, and her voice didn't sound thick. She was the right age to be my younger sister, but I didn't particularly need a sister. Her woolen dress and camel's-hair coat hadn't come from Bergdorf's, but I didn't at all need duds from Bergdorf's.

I looked at my wrist and back at her. "It's a quarter past eleven," I told her, "and there's no telling how much longer they'll keep us waiting. I saw a counter downstairs, and I'll go get coffee for the bunch if you'll come and help carry. Couldn't you use some coffee, Miss

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Bonner?"

Miss Colt looked at Miss Bonner, her employer, and Miss Bonner nodded at her and then told me it was a fine idea. I turned and raised my voice to ask if anyone didn't want coffee, got no turndowns, and Sally Colt got up and we left.

I was perfectly willing to drink some coffee. Also the physical aspects and carriage of Miss Colt had given me the impression that there might be some flaw in my attitude toward female detectives, and I wanted to check on it. But chiefly I wanted a little recess from the sight of Nero Wolfe's mug, which I had never seen quite so sour, and the fact that he had had plenty of provocation didn't make him any prettier. It was a very sad story. The wire-tapping scandals had called attention to various details concerning private detectives, to wit, that there were 590 of them licensed by the secretary of state of the state of New York; that 432 of the 590 were in New York City; that applicants for licenses took no written examination and no formal inquiry was made into their backgrounds; that the State Department had no idea how many operatives were employed by the licensed detectives, since the employees weren't licensed at all; and a lot of so on and so forth.

So the secretary of state decided to inquire, and all 590 were summoned to appear for questioning, specifically about wire-tapping activities, if any, and generally about the whole setup. Wolfe and I both had licenses and were therefore both summoned, and of course that was a nuisance, but since it was being shared by the other 588 he might have kept his reaction down to a few dozen growls and grumbles if it hadn't been for two things. First, the inquiry was being held partly in New York and partly in Albany, and we had been summoned to Albany, and his request to get it changed to New York had been ignored; and second, the only wire-tapping operation he had ever had a hand in had added nothing to his glory and damn little to his bank account, and he didn't want to be reminded of it.

So when, in Wolfe's old brownstone house, at five o'clock that winter morning, Fritz had taken his breakfast up to his room, and I had gone along to tell him the weather was possible for driving and he wouldn't have to risk the perils of a train, he was too sunk in gloom even to growl. All the way to Albany, 160 miles and four hours, with him in the back seat of the sedan as usual so he wouldn't go through the windshield when we crashed, he uttered maybe twenty words, none of them affable, and when I called his attention to the attractions of the new Thruway, which he had not seen before, he shut his eyes. We had arrived at the building in Albany to which we had been summoned at 9:55,

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five minutes earlier than specified, and had been directed to a room on the third floor and told to wait. There had of course been no chair adequate for his massive bulk. He had glanced around, stood a moment, croaked "Good morning" to those already there, gone to a chair at the far wall and got himself lowered, and sat and sulked for an hour and a quarter.

I must admit that the five others weren't very festive either. When Jay Kerr decided it ought to be more sociable he did get names passed around, but that was about all, though we were fellow members of ALPDNYS, the Association of Licensed Private Detectives of New York State—except, of course, Sally Colt, who was merely an employed operative. Jay Kerr, a half-bald rolypoly with rimless cheaters, was probably trying to even up a little by making an effort to get people together, since he had helped to get so many apart. He and his boys had tailed more husbands for wives and wives for husbands than any other outfit in the metropolitan area. Harland Ide, tall and bony, gray at the temples, with a long hawk's nose, dressed like a banker, was well-known in the trade too, but with a difference. He was an old pro with a reputation for high standards, and it was said that he had more than once been called in for consultation by the F.B.I., but don't quote me. I wasn't up on the third one, Steve Amsel, having heard only a few casual remarks about him here and there when he got the boot from Larry Bascom a couple of years back and got himself a license and rented a midtown room. Bascom, who runs one of the best agencies in town, had told someone that Amsel wasn't a lone eagle, he was a lone buzzard. He was small and dark and very neat, with quick black eyes that kept darting around looking for a place to light, and he probably wasn't as young as he looked. When Sally Colt and I went to get coffee he left his chair and was going to offer to come along, but decided not to.

At the counter downstairs, while we were waiting for the coffee, I told Sally not to worry. "If you and your boss get hooked for a tapping job, just give Mr. Wolfe a ring and he'll refer it to me and I'll fix it. No charge. Professional courtesy."

"Now that's sweet." She had her head tilted, for me to have the best angle on the line from under her ear to her chin, which was good. Showing that she was not only an attractive girl, but also kind-hearted, thinking of others. "I'll match you. When you and your boss get hooked, give Miss Bonner a ring. My boss can lick your boss."

"That's the spirit," I approved. "Loyalty or bust. You'll get pie in the sky when you die. I suppose your personal specialty is getting the subject in a corner in Peacock

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Alley and charming it out of him. If you ever feel like practicing on me I might consider it, only I don't charm very easy."

She straightened her head to meet eye to eye. Hers were dark blue. "You might be a little tough, at that," she said. "It might take a full hour to break you wide open."

The coffee came and interrupted. By the time we got to the elevator I had a return ready, a crusher, but there was company and I had to save it, and back in the room with our colleagues was no good either. She served Nero Wolfe first and I served Dol Bonner. After the others had been attended to I joined the ladies in their corner, but I didn't want to demolish Sally in front of her boss, so we merely discussed how much longer we might have to wait. That was soon decided—for me, anyhow. There was still coffee in my container when a man entered and announced that Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin were wanted. Wolfe heaved a sigh for all to hear, put his container down on a chair, arose, and headed for the door, and I followed, as a murmur went around. The man led us twenty paces down the hall, opened a door and went in, and fingered to us to enter. The staff of the secretary of state needed training in manners.

It was a medium-sized room with three large windows, all weather-dirty. In the center was a big walnut table surrounded by chairs, and against the walls were a desk and a smaller table and more chairs. A man seated at one end of the big table, with a stack of folders at his right, motioned us to chairs at his left. The one who had brought us closed the door and took a nearby chair against the wall.

The man at the table gave us a look, neither cordial nor hostile. "I guess there's no question of identity with you," he told Wolfe, meaning either that he was famous or that no one else was so big and fat, take your pick. He glanced at a folder open before him on the table. "I have your statements here, yours and Mr. Goodwin's. I thought it would expedite matters to have you in together. I am Albert Hyatt, special deputy of the secretary of state for this inquiry. The proceeding is informal and will remain so unless circumstances arise that seem to call for a record."

I was taking him in. Not far from forty, one way or the other, he was smooth all over—smooth healthy skin, smooth dark hair, smooth pleasant voice, smooth brisk manner, and smooth gray gabardine. I had of course checked on the two deputies who were handling the inquiry and had reported to Wolfe that this Hyatt was a partner in a big law firm with offices in midtown New York, that he had mixed a good deal in politics, that he had some reputation as a trial man, which meant

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that he liked to ask people questions, and that he was a bachelor.

He glanced at the folder again. "In April of last year, nineteen-fifty-five, you arranged for a tap on the private telephone of Otis Ross, at his apartment on West Eighty-third Street, Manhattan, New York City. Is that correct?"

"I have so stated," Wolfe conceded grumpily.

"So you have. Under what circumstances did you make that arrangement?"

Wolfe moved a finger to aim it at the folder. "If that's my statement before you, and Mr. Goodwin's, you have it there."

"Yes, I have your statement, but I'd like to hear it. Please answer the question."

Wolfe started to make a face, realized it wouldn't help matters any, and suppressed it. "On April fifth, nineteen-fifty-five, a man called on me at my office, gave his name as Otis Ross, and said he wanted to have his home telephone tapped. I told him I never dealt with marital difficulties. He said that his difficulty wasn't marital, that he was a widower, that he had diversified business and financial interests and handled them from his home, that he had recently begun to suspect his secretary of double dealing, that he was away frequently for a day or two at a time, that he wanted to find out whether his suspicions of his secretary were warranted, and to that end he wanted his phone tapped."

Wolfe tightened his lips. He hated to be reminded of that affair, let alone retell it. For a second I thought he was going to balk, but he went on. "I knew, of course, that it was legally permissible for a man to have his own wire tapped, but I declined the job on the ground that I had had no experience in that line. Mr. Goodwin, who was present, as he always is at conversations in my office, interposed to say that he knew of a man who could handle the technical problem. He so interposed for two reasons: first, because of the novelty and diversion a wire-tapping operation would offer him personally; and second, because he thinks it necessary to badger me into earning fees by taking jobs which I would prefer to reject. I confess that he is sometimes justified. Would you like him to interpose now for corroboration?"

Hyatt shook his head. "When you're through. Go ahead."

"Very well. Mr. Ross put a thousand dollars in cash on my desk—ten hundred-dollar bills—as a retainer and advance for expenses. He said he couldn't pay by check because his secretary must not know he had hired me, and also, for the same reason, no reports or other matter could be mailed to him; he would call for them at my office or make other arrangements to get them. And I was not to phone him at his home because he suspected

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that his secretary, on occasion, impersonated him on the telephone. Therefore he wanted reports of all conversations on his wire, since when he himself was presumed to be speaking at his end it might actually be his secretary."

Wolfe tightened his lips again. He was having to squeeze it out. "Naturally not only had my curiosity been aroused, but also my suspicions. It would have been useless to ask him for documentary evidence of his identity, since documents can be forged or stolen, so I told him that I must be satisfied with his *bona fides,* and I suggested that Mr. Goodwin might call on him at his home. You don't need to tell me how witless that suggestion was; I have told myself. He acquiesced at once, having, of course, anticipated it, saying only that it should be at an hour when his secretary would not be on the premises, since he—that is, his secretary—might possibly recognize Mr. Goodwin. So it was arranged. At nine o'clock that evening Mr. Goodwin went to the address on West Eighty-third Street and up to Mr. Ross's apartment. He gave the maid who admitted him a name—an alias that had been agreed upon—and asked to see Mr. Ross, and was taken by her to the living room, where he found my client seated under a lamp, reading a book and smoking a cigar."

Wolfe tapped the table with a fingertip. "I designate him 'my client' deliberately because I earned the ignominy—confound it, he *was* my client! After Mr. Goodwin conversed with him ten mintues or so he came home and reported, and it was decided to proceed with the operation. That evening Mr. Goodwin got in touch with the man he knew of, and arrangements were made for the morrow. Do you want the details of that?"

"No, you can skip that." Hyatt passed a palm over his smooth dark hair. "It's in Goodwin's statement."

"I know very little about it anyway. The tap was made, and Mr. Goodwin had a new toy. He couldn't spend much time with it, since I need him at the office more or less continually, and most of the listening was done by men provided by the technician. I didn't even look at the reports, for which Mr. Ross called at my office every day—at an hour when I was busy upstairs, so I didn't see him. On the fifth day Mr. Goodwin asked him for another thousand dollars, and got it, in cash. That left very little for me after paying the cost of the outside tap and maintaining surveilance. You know what an outside tap is."

"Certainly. Practically all illegal taps are outside jobs."

"That may be." Wolfe upturned a palm. "But I didn't know this was illegal until the eighth day of the operation. On April thirteenth Mr. Goodwin spent two hours at the place where the tap was being

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monitored, and heard Mr. Ross himself on the wire in a long conversation. Whether it was actually Mr. Ross or was his secretary impersonating him, it sounded sufficiently unlike our client to arouse Mr. Goodwin's interest. From reports he had read and passed on to our client he had gathered a good deal of information about Mr. Ross's interests and activities—for example, that he had recently been appointed chairman of the Charity Funds Investigating Committee by the governor. He left and went to a phone booth, called Mr. Ross, got the same voice, told him he was a newspaper reporter, from the *Gazette,* made an appointment, went to the West Eighty-third Street address, and saw him and talked with him. He also saw the secretary. Neither of them was our client. I had been flummoxed."

Wolfe swallowed bile. "Utterly flummoxed," he said bitterly. "Mr. Goodwin came home and reported to me, and we considered the situation. We decided to wait until the client came that afternoon, at five thirty as usual, for the daily report—though of course we canceled the tap at once. It seemed likely that there would be no alternative to turning him over to the police, with a full account of my fatuity, but I couldn't do that until I got my hands on him."

Wolfe swallowed again. "And he didn't come. I don't know why. Whether he had learned somehow either that we had canceled the tap, or that Mr. Goodwin had called on Mr. Ross—but speculation is bootless. He didn't come. He never did come. For a month most of Mr. Goodwin's time, for which I pay, was spent in trying to find him, without success, and Mr. Goodwin is a highly competent and ingenious man. Nor could he find the maid who had admitted him to the apartment. After a week had passed with no result I made an appointment to call on Mr. Ross at his home, and did so, and told him all about it. He was ruffled, naturally, but after some discussion he agreed that there was no point in informing the authorities until and unless I found the culprit. Mr. Goodwin was with me, and together we gave him an exhaustive description of our client, but he was unable to identify him. As for the maid, she had been with him only a short time, had left without notice, and he knew nothing about her."

Wolfe stopped, sighed deep, and let it out. "There it is. After a month Mr. Goodwin could no longer spend all his time on it, since he had other duties, but he has by no means forgotten that client and neither have I. We never will."

"I suppose not." Hyatt was smiling. "I may as well tell you, Mr. Wolfe, that personally I credit your story."

"Yes, sir. You may."

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"I hope so. But of course you realize its weakness. No one but you and Mr. Goodwin ever saw this client of yours. No one else has any knowledge of what passed between you, and you can't find him and can't identify him. Frankly, if you should be charged with illegal interception of communications, and if the district attorney proceeded against you and you came to trial, it's quite possible you would be convicted."

Wolfe's brows went up a sixteenth of an inch. "If that's a threat, what do you suggest? If it's merely a reproach, I have earned it and much more. Lecture me as you will."

"You deserve it," Hyatt agreed. He smiled again. "I would enjoy it, too, but I won't indulge myself. The fact is, I think I have a surprise for you, and I only wanted to get acquainted with you before I confronted you with it." His eyes went to the man seated against the wall. "Corwin, there's a man in room thirty-eight across the hall. Bring him in here."

Corwin got up and opened the door and went, leaving the door open. The sound came of his heavy footsteps in the hall, then of a door opening, then footsteps again, much fainter, then a brief silence, and then his voice calling, "Mr. Hyatt! Come here!"

It was more of a yelp than a call. It sounded as if somebody had him by the throat. So when Hyatt jumped up and headed for the door I moved too and followed him out and across the hall to an open door down a few steps, and into the room. I was at his elbow when he stopped beside Corwin at the far end of a table to look down at a man on the floor. The man was in no condition to return the look. He was on his back, with his legs nearly straight making a V, and was dressed all right, including a necktie, only the necktie wasn't under his shirt collar. It was knotted tight around the skin of his neck. Although his face was purple, his eyes popping, and his tongue sticking out, I recognized him at once. Corwin and Hyatt, staring down at him, probably didn't know I was there, and in a second I wasn't. Stepping out and back to the other room, where Wolfe sat at the table glowering, I told him, "It's a surprise all right. Our client's in there on the floor. Someone tied his necktie too tight and he's dead."

I had known, of course, that that bozo had sunk a blade right in the center of Wolfe's self-esteem, but I didn't realize how deep it had gone until that moment. Evidently when he heard me say our client was in there his ears stopped working. He came up out of his chair and took a step toward the door, then stopped, turned, and glared at me.

"Oh," he said, coming to. "Dead?"

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"Right. Strangled."

"It would be no satisfaction to see him dead." He looked at the door, at me, sat down, flattened his palms on the table top, and closed his eyes. After a little he opened them. "Confound that wretch," he muttered. "Alive he gulled me, and now dead he gets me into heaven knows what. Perhaps if we went...but no. I am merely frantic." He stood up. "Come." He started for the door.

I got in front of him. "Hold it. I want to go home too, but you know damn well we can't scoot."

"I do indeed. But I want a look at our confreres. Come."

I stood aside and let him lead the way out and down the hall and into the room we had come from. Entering beheind him, I shut the door. The two females were still in their corner, but the three men were gathered in a group, apparently having broken the ice. They all looked around at us, and Jay Kerr sang out, "What, still at large? How is he?"

Wolfe stood and took them in. So did I. At that point there was no particular reason to assume that one of them had tied our client's necktie, but the client had unquestionably been connected with wire tapping, and they had all been summoned to answer questions about wire tapping. So Wolfe and I took them in. None of them trembled or turned pale or licked his lips or had a fit.

Wolfe spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are fellow members of a professional association, and therefore you might expect me to share with you any information I may have of our common concern. But I have just learned of an event in this building this morning that will cause Mr. Goodwin and me to suffer inconvenience and possibly serious harassment. I have no reason to suppose that any of you were involved in it, but you may have been; and if you weren't, you would gain nothing by hearing it from me, so I'll let someone else tell you about it. You won't have long to wait. Meanwhile, please understand that I mean no offense in staring around at you. I am merely interested in the possibility that one of you *is* involved. If you—"

"What the hell!" Steve Amsel snorted. His quick black eyes had lit at last. "You got a point?"

"It's a good script and I like it," Jay Kerr said. "Go right on." His voice was thin and high, but that was no sign that he had strangled a man. It was just his voice.

Harland Ide, the banker type, cleared his throat. "If we're not involved," he said drily, "we are not concerned. You say in this building this morning? What kind of event?"

Wolfe shook his head, and stood and stared around. Still no one had a fit. Instead, they talked, and the general feeling seemed to be one of

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relief that they had been given something to talk about. Steve Amsel suggested that Dol Bonner and Sally Colt should get Wolfe between them and worm it out of him, but the ladies politely declined.

Wolfe was still standing, still taking them in, when the door popped open and Albert Hyatt appeared. Seeing Wolfe, he stopped short and said, "Oh, here you are." A strand of his smooth hair had got loose. He looked at me. "You too. You came in behind me and saw him, didn't you?"

I told him yes.

"And left in a hurry?"

"Sure. You had told Mr. Wolfe you had a surprise for him, and I wanted to tell him what it was."

"You recognized him?"

"I did. The client Mr. Wolfe told you about."

Wolfe put in, "I would have appreciated the favor of seeing him alive."

"Perhaps. Of course you have told these people?"

"No, sir."

"You haven't?"

"No."

Hyatt's eyes went around. "Apparently you're all here. Jay Kerr?"

"That's me," Kerr admitted.

"Harland Ide?"

"Here."

"Steven Amsel?"

Amsel raised a hand.

"Theodolinda Bonner?"

"I'm here, and I've been here more than two hours. I am quite willing to—"

"One moment, Miss Bonner. Sally Colt?"

"Here."

"All right. The hearing I am conducting on behalf of the secretary of state is temporarily suspended, but you will all stay in this room. A dead body has been discovered in a room on this floor. A man presumably murdered. That is of course a matter for the police, and they will want to see you. I can't say now when the hearing will be resumed, and you will regard your summonses to appear today as in abeyance but not canceled. Don't leave this room until the police come." He turned to go. A voice stopped him.

"Who is the murdered man?" It was Harland Ide.

"The police will tell you. That's not my province, thank God."

"Mr. Hyatt." Dol Bonner's voice was clear and crisp. She was on her feet. "You are Mr. Hyatt?"

"I am."

"Miss Colt and I had a very early breakfast, and we're hungry. We are going to get something to eat."

Damn plucky, I thought. She must have known that a murderer is supposed to feel empty and want a big meal after killing a man. Hyatt told her she'd have to wait until the police came, ignored a protest from Steve Amsel, and left, closing the door.

They looked around at one an-

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other. I was disappointed in them. I had on various occasions been cooped up with an assortment of people on account of a murder, but that was the first time they were exclusively private detectives, and you might have thought they would be a little quicker on the ball than most. No. It would have taken an average group maybe a minute to absorb the shock of Hyatt's announcement and hop on Wolfe and me, and that was about what it took them. Steve Amsel got to it first. He was about half Wolfe's size, and, facing him close, he had to tilt his head back to give his quick black eyes a straight line.

"So that was the event. Murder." He didn't make it "moider" but something in between. "Okay. Who was it?"

Jay Kerr joined in. "Yeah, Goodwin recognized him. Name him."

Dol Bonner approached, expectantly, with Sally trailing behind her elbow. Harland Ide said, "If I heard correctly, Mr. Wolfe, he was a client of yours?"

They were hemming Wolfe in, and he backed up a step. "I can't tell you who he was," he said, "because I don't know. Neither does Mr. Goodwin. We don't know his name."

Sally Colt started to titter and choked it. "Nuts," Steve Amsel said, disgusted. "But Goodwin recognized him? This a guessing game you thought up?"

"And he was your client?" Jay Kerr squeaked.

"Really, Mr. Wolfe," Dol Bonner protested, "aren't you making a farce of it? You, with your reputation? Do you expect us to believe that you took a man as a client without even learning his name?"

"No." Wolfe compressed his lips. He released them. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am compelled to ask your forbearance. The silliest blunder I have ever made has found me here today, to my deep chagrin and possibly my undoing. What more do you want? What further ignominy? Mr. Goodwin recognized him, he was my client, I don't know his name, and before and after the period when I worked for him I know nothing whatever about him. That's all."

He marched to a chair against the wall, sat, rested his fists on his thighs, and closed his eyes.

I crossed over to him and lowered my voice. "Any instructions?"

"No." His eyes stayed shut.

"As you know, Gil Tauber is here in Albany. He certainly knows the cops. Shall I go find a phone and alert him in case we could use some information?"

"No."

Evidently he didn't feel like chatting. I went over to the confreres, still in a group, and told them, "If you folks want to discuss our ignominy, don't mind me. You might even say something helpful."

"Where's the body?" Steve Amsel asked.

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"Room thirty-eight, down the hall."

"What killed him?"

"His necktie around his throat. I suppose he could have done it himself, but you know how that is. I prefer not, and he might have been calmed down first with a heavy brass ashtray. There was one there on the floor."

"You and Wolfe came last this morning," Harland Ide stated. "Did you see him on the way?"

I grinned at him. "Now look," I objected. "We'll get enough of that from the cops. Have a heart. We're fellow members of a professional association. *You* would grill me?"

"Not at all," he said stiffly. "I merely thought that if that room is between here and the elevator, and the door was open, you might have seen him, possibly even spoken with him. I certainly did not intend—"

He was interrupted. The door opened and a man entered, a big broad-shouldered ape with not enough features to fill up his big round face. He shut the door, stood, and counted us, with his lips moving, and then pulled a chair over by the door and sat. He had nothing to say.

Again that bunch of pros disappointed me. They knew quite well that the presence of the dick had no bearing on their freedom to converse, and as for being discreet one glance at his mug should have made it plain that he lacked the mental machinery to register and report anything he heard, granting he could hear. But they clammed up, and stayed clammed for a good half an hour. Just to see, I made a few tries at starting some discourse, but nothing doing. The ladies had gone back to their corner, and I tried them too, and got the impression that Sally would have been willing to relieve the tension with a little give and take, but as for Dol Bonner, definitely not, and she was the boss.

I had just glanced at my wrist watch and seen ten minutes past one when the door opened again. This time there were two of them. The one in front was a six-footer with a long narrow phiz and grizzled hair. He stopped three paces in, sent his eyes around, and told us, "I'm Leon Groom, chief of detectives of the City of Albany."

He paused, for applause maybe, but didn't get it. His facial expression was superior, and so was his tone of voice, which was natural under the circumstances. Not often does a chief of detectives get to address an audience composed exclusively of private eyes, a breed they would like to blackball, and not only that, we were all from the big town, which made us mud.

He resumed. "You have been told that there has been a death by violence in a room on this floor, and you're being detained for questioning. Nero Wolfe and Archie Good-

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win will come with me. Now. The rest of you will shortly be taken, one at a time, to view the body." He aimed a thumb at his companion. "This man will ask you what kind of sandwiches you want and they'll be brought to you. On the City of Albany. You're Theodolinda Bonner?"

"Yes."

"A policewoman will be here before long, in case a search of your persons is required."

"With consent," Steve Amsel said offensively.

"Certainly with consent. Nero Wolfe? Come along, you and Archie Goodwin."

Wolfe got up and headed for the door, saying, as he passed me, "Come, Archie." I was on his payroll, and he wasn't going to have other people giving me orders.

There were three men in the hall, one in his own clothes, looking important, and two in uniform, looking bored, guarding an empty meat basket near the door of room thirty-eight. Inside the room were three more – scientists, two with fingerprint outfits and one with a camera. They took time out to look as Groom, having told us to touch nothing, convoyed Wolfe around the table to the corpse. Except that its legs had been straightened and its necktie removed, it hadn't changed much. Wolfe frowned down at it.

Groom asked him, "Do you identify him?"

"No," Wolfe declared. "I don't know who he is. I do, however, recognize him as a man I saw one day last April when he called on me, gave his name as Otis Ross, and engaged my services. I learned later that he was not Otis Ross–at least not the Otis Ross he had claimed to be. Mr. Goodwin, who saw him not once but nine times, has already stated that he is that man."

"I know. Is that still your opinion, Goodwin?"

"Not an opinion." If Wolfe could correct his choice of words so could I. "Conviction. He's that man–or was."

"Then we can–oh, by the way." He turned to the table, pointed to an object on it, and asked one of the scientists, "Are you through with this ashtray, Walsh?"

"All done, Captain. Got it."

"Then you can help a little, Goodwin, if you don't mind. Just an experiment. Take it and hold it the way you would to hit a man on the head with it. Just naturally, without thinking."

"Sure," I said, and reached to get it. Jiggling it, I would have said at least a pound and probably more. "There would be two ways, both good. Either take it by the rim, like this, that would be best if you had room and time to swing"–I swung to show him–"or, with a big mitt and long fingers like mine, just cup it, like this, and you could either swing or hook or jab." I performed a healthy jab, then transferred the

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tray to my left hand, got out my handkerchief with my right, and started wiping the brass with plenty of pressure.

"Not so good," Groom said. "Your slapstick may go over big down where you belong, but here in the City of Albany we don't appreciate it. It won't buy you a thing."

"What would?" I demanded. "What did you want me to do, refuse to touch it?" I finished the rubbing and put the tray back on the table.

"Come along," he said, and moved. We followed him out and down the hall nearly to the end, where he opened a door and stood aside for us to pass. This was a corner room with windows on two sides, and it sported a couple of rugs. Seated at a desk with a window behind him was Albert Hyatt, talking on the phone. A man with big ears and a scar on his cheek came toward us and asked Groom how he wanted the chairs. So Wolfe and I would face the window, naturally. By the time Hyatt finished on the phone we were disposed, with Wolfe and me side by side and the man with big ears at a little table nearby, with a notebook in front of him and a pen ready.

Hyatt stood up and invited Groom to come and take the desk, and Groom said no thanks and kept his chair on this side of it, facing us. He focused on Wolfe. "Mr. Hyatt has let me read your statement. Your statement to the secretary of state regarding wire tapping. He has also told me what you said to him this morning—merely a repetition of parts of the statement. Do you now want to change it?"

"No, sir."

"Do you want to add anything to it?"

"That depends. If I am under suspicion of murder, or if Mr. Goodwin is, I wish to add something. Are we under suspicion?"

"Put it this way. You're not charged. You're being held for questioning, by police authority, to learn if you have any knowledge of the murder of a man with whom you admit you have been associated, and against whom you had a grievance. You did have a grievance?"

"I did indeed. I wish to make a further statement."

"Go ahead."

"I was summoned by the secretary of state to appear at this address in Albany at ten o'clock this morning. At six o'clock this morning I left my house in New York, in my car, with Mr. Goodwin driving. We stopped once en route, to eat something we had with us, and for coffee. We arrived at this address shortly before ten o'clock and entered the building, were directed to room forty-two on the third floor, went straight there, speaking to no one, and I remained there until I was taken to see Mr.

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Hyatt. Mr. Goodwin was out of the room briefly, with Miss Sally Colt, to go for coffee. I have not at any time seen or spoken to—what am I to call that creature?"

"The murdered man?"

"Yes."

"Call him your client."

"I prefer not to, in this context. I've had other clients. With regard to the man who called on me last April and told me he was Otis Ross, and hired me to do a job as described in my statement to the secretary of state, I have never seen him or had any communication with him, or known anything of his whereabouts, since April thirteenth, nineteen-fifty-five. My next knowledge of him was when, after leaving the room with Mr. Hyatt this morning, Mr. Goodwin returned almost immediately to tell me that he was lying dead in a nearby room. My next sight of him was a few minutes ago, when I was taken to that room and saw him dead. I had not known that he was on the premises. It is inane to pile up negatives. I have no knowledge whatever of his death or of his movements prior to his death. Beyond the facts given in my statement to the secretary of state, I have no knowledge of any nature that might be of help in the investigation of this murder."

Wolfe considered a moment. "There, Mr. Groom. I don't see what good can come of questions, but certainly you can try."

"Yeah, I can always try." Groom looked at me, and I thought it was my turn, but he went back to Wolfe. "You say you entered this building this morning shortly before ten o'clock. How much before?"

"Of my own knowledge, I don't know. I don't carry a watch. But as we entered Mr. Goodwin remarked that it was five minutes to ten. He claims that he never allows his watch to be more than thirty seconds off."

"What time was it when you got to room forty-two?"

"I don't know. I can only estimate. I would say that it took us four minutes, to the elevator, up to the third floor, and down the hall to the room. That would make it one minute to ten."

"What if one or more of the others say that you arrived in the room about a quarter past ten?"

Wolfe eyed him. "Mr. Groom. That question is pointless and you know it. As a menace it is puerile. As a mere hypothesis it is flippant. And if one of them does say that you know how many issues it will raise, including his candor. Or more than one—even all of them. If you want your question answered as you put it, either his timepiece was wrong or his memory is at fault or he lies."

"Yeah." Apparently Groom was hard to rile. He shifted to me. "Naturally you corroborate everything Wolfe has said. Do you?"

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"Naturally," I told him.

"Yes or no. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Including the time of your arrival at this building?"

"Yes. Nine fifty-five."

He got up and stepped to me. "Let's see your watch."

I twisted my arm around and pushed the shirt cuff back, and he took a look, then looked at his own, then back at mine. He told the man at the table, "Put it that I found Goodwin's watch twenty seconds slow," and returned to his chair.

"You may wonder," he said, "why I didn't take you two separately. Because it would have been a waste of time. From what I know of your reputations and how you work, I figured that if you had fixed up a story the chance of my getting you to cross was so slim that it wasn't worth the trouble. Also Mr. Hyatt wanted to go to lunch, and I wanted him with us, and you might as well know why." He turned. "Will you tell them what you told me, Mr. Hyatt?"

Hyatt's strand of hair was back in place again. He was leaning forward with his elbows on the desk. "You mean about this morning?" he asked Groom.

"Yes. Just that."

"Well, I got here early, a little before nine o'clock. One of my staff, Tom Frazer, was already here. We were here at this desk together, going over papers, getting ready for those who were to appear today, when the girl phoned me that a man wanted to see me about something that he said was urgent and confidential, he wouldn't say what. He gave the name of Donahue, which meant nothing to me. I didn't want him interrupting in here, so I went out front to get rid of him and found him on a bench in the hall. He wouldn't talk in the hall, so I took him to the nearest empty room, room thirty-eight. He was a middle-aged man, about my height, brown hair and eyes—"

"They've seen him," Groom put in.

"Oh." Hyatt was fussed. "So they have. He said his name was William A. Donahue and he wanted to make a deal. He said he knew who was due to appear before me today, and that Nero Wolfe was one of them, and that he had got cold feet and wanted to get from under. His terms. Must I give the whole conversation, Captain? We talked for some twenty minutes."

"The substance will do. The main points."

"There was only one main point, actually. He floundered around a good deal, but this was the gist of it. In connection with a venture he was engaged in, he didn't say what, he had procured some wiretapping operations, one of them through Nero Wolfe, for which he had paid Wolfe two thousand dollars. When the scandal started—he called it the big stink—and Broady

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was arrested and indicted, he had decided New York was too hot for him and had left the state. When he learned recently that this inquiry was to be held by the secretary of state, and that all private detectives were to be questioned, he had become alarmed, particularly on account of Nero Wolfe. Wolfe had abruptly called off the tap he had handled for him, and they had had a row, and Wolfe had it in for him. He knew how tricky Wolfe was, and now that he had been summoned—am I confusing you with my pronouns?"

He was looking at Wolfe, so Wolfe replied. "Not at all. Go on."

"—And now that Wolfe had been summoned, he knew he would try to wriggle out of it somehow or other, and that he—Donahue—would get hooked for something worse than procurement of illegal wire tapping. So he wanted to make a deal with me. If I would use my influence with the district attorney to go easy with him on the wire-tapping charges, he would give me a full account of the operation, under oath, and would testify in court as required. I asked him if Wolfe had known the tap was illegal, and he said yes. I asked him if Donahue was his real name, and if he had given that name to Wolfe, and he said yes. I asked him for further information about himself, and he wouldn't give me any until and unless I agreed to his proposal—except one item, that in New York he had lived at the Hotel Marbury. I told him I couldn't make such a deal offhand, I'd have to think it over a little, and told him to wait there in the room and left him there, and came back to this room and—"

"What time was it then?" Groom asked.

"It was half-past nine, a minute or two after. I don't keep my watch as close to the dot as Goodwin does, but it's fairly accurate." He looked at his wrist. "I've got one forty-two."

"You're three minutes fast."

"Then it was about exactly nine thirty when I returned to this room." He went back to Wolfe. "I looked, of course, to see how much time I had. The hearing was supposed to begin at ten. I thought it was important enough to consult the secretary of state about it, so I called his office, but was told that he was in New York for a conference and his secretary didn't know where I could reach him at that hour. I phoned the office of the district attorney of New York County and got Assistant D.A. Lambert, a friend of mine, and told him I wanted an emergency police report on a William A. Donahue who had lived last spring at the Hotel Marbury, as quickly as possible. At a quarter past ten I had had no word, and I tried to get the executive deputy secretary of state on the wire, but he wasn't in his office. I told Tom Frazer all about it, and—"

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Groom stopped him. "I think that'll do. You didn't go back to room thirty-eight to see Donahue."

"No. I had told him it would take an hour or more, possibly two. When no report had come from New York at eleven o'clock—none had come yet—I decided to get Wolfe and Donahue face to face and see what happened, and I went to the hearing room and sent for Wolfe and Goodwin." Hyatt looked at his watch. "I'm late for a lunch appointment."

"Yeah, I know." Groom looked at Wolfe. "You want to ask Mr. Hyatt anything?"

Wolfe had his legs crossed, as usual when he was on a chair too small for him and without arms. He uncrossed them and put his palms on his knees. "Just a question or two. You will remember, Mr. Hyatt, that you told me that you personally credited my story. Why did you tell me that?"

"Because I meant it."

"You had already talked with this Donahue."

"Yes, but I hadn't believed him. I know something of your record and standing, and I knew nothing whatever of his. On the simple issue of veracity I preferred you, at least tentatively."

"Do you still credit my story?"

"Well . . ." Hyatt looked at Groom and back at Wolfe. "Under the present circumstances I'm afraid my personal opinion is neither relevant nor cogent."

"I suppose not. One other thing. This Donahue said he had procured some wire-tapping operations. Plural. Did he mention any names other than mine?"

"Yes, he mentioned others, but he concentrated on you throughout the conversation."

"What other names did he mention?"

"Just a minute," Groom cut in. "I don't think that's called for. We won't keep you any longer, Mr. Hyatt."

"I want to know," Wolfe insisted, "if that man mentioned the names of any of the others summoned here today."

He had to keep on wanting. Hyatt looked at Groom, Groom shook his head, and Hyatt got up and went. Wolfe crossed his legs again, and also his arms, but the props weren't right. He never was as impressive when he was on a chair that allowed portions of his fundament to lap over at the edges of the seat. When the door had closed behind the special deputy of the secretary of state, Groom spoke. "I wanted you to hear that direct from Mr. Hyatt. It's neater that way. Do you want to change your statement now? Or add to it? Of course Donahue's dead, but we've got his track and we know where to dig. You know how that is."

"Yes, I know." Wolfe grunted. "I like to talk, Mr. Groom, but not to no purpose. As for changing my statement, I might improve its dic-

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tion or its punctuation, but materially, no. As for adding to it, I might make a few footnotes, as for instance that that man lied when he told Mr. Hyatt that he had given me his name as Donahue, and that I knew that the tap was illegal, but they are already implicit in the statement. I do have a request to make. I now have his name, at least the name he gave Mr. Hyatt, and the name of the hotel where he lived at the time he called on me. I can be of no use to you here; I have absolutely nothing for you; and if I am permitted to return to New York at once I shall devote all my talents and resources to the exposure of his background, his activities, his connections with—"

He stopped because Groom had turned his head. Groom had turned his head because the door had opened and a man was approaching, a colleague in uniform. The cop came to him, said, "For you, Captain," and handed him a folded paper. Groom unfolded the paper, gave it a look, taking his time, told the cop to stick around, glanced at the paper again, and lifted his eyes to Wolfe and me.

"This is a warrant," he said, "for your arrest as material witnesses in a murder case. I hereby serve it. Do you want to see it?"

I turned my head to Wolfe. I can testify that through a full ten-second silence his lids didn't blink once. Then he spoke, but all he said was "No."

"I do," I said, and put out a hand, and Groom handed it over. It looked okay, and even had our names spelled right. The signature of the judge looked like Bymnyomr. "I guess it's real," I told Wolfe.

He was regarding Groom. "I hardly know," he said icily, "the word to use. High-handed? Bumptious? Headstrong?"

"You're not in New York now, Wolfe." Groom was trying not to show how much he liked himself. "This is the City of Albany. I'll ask you once more, do you want to change your statement or add to it?"

"You actually mean to serve the thing?"

"I *have* served it. You're under arrest."

Wolfe turned to me. "What's Mr. Parker's number?"

"Eastwood six two-six-oh-five."

He arose, circled around the desk to the chair Hyatt had vacated, sat, and took the phone from the cradle. Groom got to his feet, took a step, stopped, stood, and stuck his hands in his pockets. Wolfe told the phone. "A New York City call, please. Eastwood six two-six-oh-five."

Four hours later, at six o'clock, we were still in the coop. Of course I had been behind bars before, but never with Wolfe. For him it was a first, since I had known him.

Actually we weren't behind bars,

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or at least none were visible. It was a detention room at police headquarters, and wasn't bad at all, except that it smelled like a hospital in the middle of the Jersey marshes and the chairs were greasy. There was even a private john in a closet in a corner. A cop was there with us, presumably to see that we didn't cheat the chair by making a suicide pact and carrying it out. When I told him an evening paper would be worth a buck to us he opened the door and yelled down the hall to someone, sticking to his post. Taking no chances.

Soon after our incarceration we had been told we could send out for grub, and I had ordered two corned-beef sandwiches on white toast and a quart of milk. Wolfe, who had swallowed nothing but coffee since ten o'clock, declined the offer. Whether he was staging a hunger strike or was just too mad to eat, I couldn't say. When my corned beef on white toast arrived it turned out to be ham on rye, and the ham was only so-so, but the milk was fine.

Not only was Wolfe not eating in captivity, also he wasn't talking. Keeping his hat on, he sat on his overcoat spread on an old wooden bench against the wall, mostly leaning back with his eyes closed and his fingers interlaced at the summit of his central mound. Looking at him, and I had seen a lot of him, I would say that instead of calming down he kept getting madder. His only real try at communication, after a couple of hours had passed, was when he opened his eyes and told me he wanted my true opinion about something. I said he could have my true opinion about everything, and apparently we'd have plenty of time for it.

He grunted. "I forsee that in the future, if you and I continue to be associated, as we probably shall, this episode will be frequently mentioned, in one context or another. Do you agree?"

"I do. Provided it's not our last episode. You're assuming we'll have a future."

"Pfui. We'll see to that. Answer this. If you had not been seduced by your itch to have a hand in a wire-tapping operation and to observe the procedure and technique, do you think I would have undertaken that job for that man? I'm merely asking for your opinion."

"Well, you won't get it." I stood looking down at him. "If I say no, the future mentions would be too one-sided. If I say yes, it would pile one more provocation on the load you're already carrying, and it might be too much for you. You can't think us out of this if you're boiling too high to think. So I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll split it."

"Split what?"

"The blame. Fifty-fifty. We both ought to be larruped. But not fried."

"We'll leave it to the future," he growled, and shut his eyes on me.

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At six o'clock I was deep in the second section of the evening paper, reading how to repair nylon brassieres that had got torn somehow, when the door was flung open. Our guard whirled on his heels, ready to repel an attempt at armed rescue, but it was only a cop conducting a visitor. The visitor, a red-faced guy in a brown cashmere overcoat, stopped for a glance around and then came on and put out a hand.

"Mr. Wolfe? I'm Stanley Rogers. I'm terribly sorry. I suppose you thought I'd fallen in a hole and pulled the hole in, but Nat Parker didn't get me until nearly three o'clock, and the judge was in the middle of a case and I had to pull some strings. We're not being very hospitable up here, are we? This is Mr. Goodwin? It's a pleasure." He offered a hand, and I took it. "I asked the judge to make the bail figure five thousand, but he wouldn't settle for less than twenty. Twenty thousand each. Anyhow, you're free men, as I have no doubt you deserve to be, only you can't leave the jurisdiction without permission of the court. I've reserved a room for you at the Latham Hotel, but of course it can be canceled if you want to make other arrangements."

He had some papers for us to sign. He said that Parker, phoning from New York, had told him to do everything possible for us, and he would cancel a dinner appointment if we wanted him, but Wolfe said that at the moment all he wanted was to get out of there and find something to eat. One offer we took. He had his car out front, and after telling the guard goodbye, no tip, and going to an office to check out and claim some personal articles we had been relieved of, he led us out to it and drove us to the garage where we had left the sedan. With Wolfe in back again, I drove to the hotel, got the bags from the trunk, and turned the car over to a lackey.

About the bags, I could have told Wolfe I had told him so, but decided he was in no shape for it. The evening before, pigheaded as usual, he had refused to admit the possibility of spending a night away from home and insisted that we would need no luggage, but I had packed his bag myself, with some help from Fritz, on the theory that man proposes but some other specimen may dispose. Now, as the bellboy followed us into room 902 and put the bags on the rack, it was a fine opportunity for a casual cutting remark, but I thought it advisable to save it.

His overcoat hung in the closet, along with mine, Wolfe removed his coat, vest, tie, and shirt, and went to the bathroom and washed his hands and face. Emerging, he put on his dressing gown, a yellow wool number with fine black stripes, got his slippers, sat on a chair to take off his shoes, and told me to phone room service to send

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up a menu. I reminded him that Rogers had told us the Latham grub was only fair and that the best restaurant in town was only two blocks away.

"I'm not interested," he declared. "I have no appetite, and will have no palate. I eat because I must. You know quite well I can't work on an empty stomach."

So he was going to work.

I don't remember a gloomier meal. The food was perfectly edible—oysters, consommé, roast beef, creamed potatoes, broccoli, salad, apple pie with cheese, coffee—and we cleaned it up, but the atmosphere had no sparkle. Though Wolfe never talks business at the table, he likes to talk while eating, about anything and everything but business, and nearly always does. That time he didn't utter a single word from beginning to end, and I made no effort to start him. Finishing his second cup of coffee, he pushed his chair back and muttered at me, "What time is it?"

I looked. "Twenty after eight."

"Well." He pulled air in through his mouth all the way down to the roast beef, and let it out through his nose. "I don't know if you realize the pickle I'm in."

"The pickle is split too. Fifty-fifty."

"Only to a point. The jeopardy, yes, but I have a special difficulty. We're going to be held here until this case is solved. I can hurry our release only by solving it, but I don't want to. Certainly people cannot be permitted to murder with impunity, but I would prefer to have no hand in exposing the man who killed that abominable creature. What am I to do?"

I waved a hand. "That's easy. Sit it out. This room isn't so bad. You can go to sessions of the state legislature when it meets, and get books from the library, and I can teach Sally Colt things if she's hung up here too. If it drags on into months, as it probably will if that Groom is the best they've got, we can rent a little apartment and send for Fritz—"

"Shut up."

"Yes, sir. Or perhaps Sally and I could solve it without you. I don't feel as grateful to the bird who did it as you seem to. If—"

"Bosh. I am not grateful. I wanted to see him again alive. Very well. As between the intolerable and the merely distasteful, I must choose the latter. I presume the others are also being held in the jurisdiction."

"If you mean our confreres, sure they are. Maybe not arrested like us, but held, certainly. Groom's not sold on us enough to let them go, and anyway Hyatt wants them for his hearing."

He nodded. "I have to see them. Some of them may be in this hotel. Find them and bring them here."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"Have you any suggestions?"

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"No. My mind's not in order. I'll try to get it arranged by the time you get them."

That had happened before, many times. He knew that my only alternatives were either to protest that he was biting off more than I could chew, or to take it as a compliment that if he wanted a miracle passed all he had to do was snap his fingers at me; and also he knew which I would pick.

"Okay," I told him. "Then will you please phone room service to come and get the dishes? And you might as well phone Fritz so he won't start worrying. I've got some thinking to do."

I went to a window, parted the curtains, put the blind up, and stood looking down at the street by night. It wasn't the first time I had been given the chore of setting up a party, but it had never been with a gang of private dicks, and they would need something special. Brilliant ideas started coming. Tell them Wolfe thought they would be interested to hear what Hyatt had asked him at the hearing. Tell them Wolfe had an idea for getting all of us released from the jurisdiction and wanted to consult with them. Tell them Wolfe had certain information about the murdered man which he had not given to the police and wanted to discuss it. Tell them that Wolfe thought it was important to fix the time of arrival of each of us at room 42 and wanted us to get together on it. And so on, up to a dozen or so. I rattled them around in my skull. The idea was to get one that would work with all of them.

Suddenly I remembered that Wolfe had once told me that the best way to choose among an assortment of ideas was to take the simplest. I pulled the blind down and turned. He had just finished talking to Fritz and was lowering himself into the chair with arms, which was almost wide enough. I asked him, "You want them together, don't you?"

He said yes.

"How soon?"

"Oh . . . twenty minutes. Half an hour."

I went and sat on the edge of one of the beds, lifted the phone, and told the girl I understood Mr. Harland Ide was registered and would she please ring his room. In two moments his bass, a little hoarse, told me hello.

"Mr. Harland Ide?"

"Speaking."

"This is Archie Goodwin. I'm calling for Mr. Wolfe. We're in room nine-oh-two. He would like very much to consult you about something, not on the phone. Right now he's resting. If you'll do him the favor of dropping in at room nine-oh-two, say in half an hour, he'll appreciate it very much. Say nine o'clock. We hope you will."

A brief silence. "Could you give me an idea?"

"Better not, on the phone."

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A slightly longer silence. "All right, I'll be there."

The simplest is the best. Of course their being private detectives was a big advantage. Tell any private detective you want to discuss something that is too hot for the phone, and he'll swim a river to get to you.

They weren't all quite as simple as Ide. Steve Amsel wasn't registered at the Latham, but I got him at another hotel and sold him on the trip. Jay Kerr was at the Latham, but his line was busy the first two tries and I got him last. Dol Bonner and Sally Colt were on our floor, room 917, and I wished I had gone down the hall and dined with them instead of putting up with a dummy. At first Dol Bonner didn't care for the idea, but when I told her the others were coming she said we could expect her. Having got Kerr on the third try, I hung up and turned to Wolfe. "All set. Want anyone else? Groom? Hyatt? The secretary of state?"

"What time is it?"

"Nine minutes to nine."

"Confound it, I must dress." He arose and started peeling the dressing gown. He wasn't going to receive females in negligee, especially in a hotel room.

It was a good-sized room and wasn't too crowded with seven people, or, counting Wolfe as two, eight. I had phoned down a rush order for four more chairs, so no one had to perch on a bed. Dol Bonner and Sally, still sticking close, were over by the wall. Steve Amsel, next to them, had turned his chair around and folded his arms on top of its back, with his chin resting on his wrist. He was still very neat, and his black eyes were still quick. Harland Ide looked tired, but still dignified enough for a banker. Jay Kerr, the half-bald roly-poly, was the last one to show. He brought along two clues that were spotted immediately by my highly trained powers of observation: a flushed face and a breath.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed at sight of us. "A party, huh? You didn't tell me, Archie. Well, well!"

"Siddown and listen," Amsel commanded him. "We waited for you. Wolfe wants to sing a song."

"That I'd like to hear," Kerr said cordially, and sat.

Wolfe's eyes went around. "I think the best way to begin," he said, "is to read you the statement I submitted to the secretary of state." He took a document from his pocket and unfolded it. "It's rather long, but I want you to know my position. If you'll permit me."

"Sure," Kerr told him. "Shoot."

He started reading. It took a full ten minutes, but he held his audience. I must admit I felt for him. What he would have liked to do with that affair was scrap it and try to forget it, but, having already been compelled to record it in a

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sworn statement and to recite it to Hyatt, he now had to spill it again to a collection of his fellow members of a professional association. It must have been about the bitterest pill he ever had to take, but he got it down. When he got to the end he refolded it and handed it to me.

He rested his elbows on the chair arms and matched his fingertips. "So this morning I couldn't tell you the name of the murdered man. I spoke then of my ignominy, and I won't dwell on it. Do any of you want anything in the statement clarified? Any questions?"

Apparently nobody had any. Wolfe resumed, "Mr. Goodwin told you on the phone that I wanted to consult you about something. It is this. We are all involved in an investigation of a murder and are under restraint. Mr. Goodwin and I have been arrested as material witnesses and released on bail. I don't know if any of you have been arrested, but certainly your movements have been restricted. I think it will be to our common advantage to pool our information, discuss it, and decide what can be done with it. We are all trained and experienced investigators."

Amsel started to speak, but Wolfe raised a hand. "If you please. Before you comment, let me say that neither Mr. Goodwin nor I had anything to do with that man's death, nor have we any knowledge of it. Possibly that is true of all of you. If so, the worth of my suggestion is manifest; we would be nincompoops not to share our information and join our wits. If not, if one of you killed him or had a hand in it, he certainly won't tell us, and probably he will be reluctant to give us any information at all; but obviously it would be to the interest of the rest of us to merge our knowledge and our resources. Don't you agree?"

For the first time they exchanged glances. Jay Kerr said, "Pretty neat. Well, well! Last one in is a monkey."

"You put it good," Amsel declared. "If I don't play I'm it."

"I have a question." It was Harland Ide. "Why were you and Goodwin arrested and put under bail?"

"Because," Wolfe told him, "that man—I presume you all know by now that his name was Donahue—because he told Mr. Hyatt a story this morning which conflicted with my statement. He said that he had given me his name as Donahue and that I knew the tap was illegal."

"Ouch," Kerr said. "No wonder you want us to open up."

"I have opened up, Mr. Kerr. I'll answer any questions you care to ask. And I assure you I'm not impelled by any fear of ultimate disaster, either for Mr. Goodwin or for myself. I merely want to go home."

Dol Bonner spoke up. "It seems to me," she said, "that the only question is whether it will do any

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good or not. It can't do any harm. We have already given the police all the information we have, at least I have and Miss Colt has, and tomorrow they'll be at us again." She directed the caramel-colored eyes at Wolfe. "What good will it do?"

He frowned at her. Sometimes he honestly tries to speak to a woman without frowning at her, but he seldom makes it. "Possibly none, madam. But among us we pretend to a considerable batch of gumption, and we may even have it. If so, we might as well use it, since our only alternative is to sit and brood, hoping that Mr. Groom has either brains or luck. Have you people compared notes at all?"

He got three noes and two headshakes.

"Then it's about time. You don't even know whether one or more of you can safely be eliminated. Assuming that one of us killed him, do you know what the time limits are? . . . You don't. Evidently you haven't had the privilege, as I have, of hearing Mr. Hyatt's story. The murder was committed between nine thirty, when Mr. Hyatt left Donahue alone in the room, and ten o'clock, when Mr. Goodwin and I arrived. Assuming that one of us killed him—an assumption we must accept unless we find an excuse for discarding it. Therefore if one or more of you can establish that you arrived in room forty-two before nine thirty, and stayed there, you're out of it. Can you?"

"Not me," Dol Bonner said. "Miss Colt and I were there first, at twenty minutes to ten. About five minutes later Mr. Ide came, and in another four or five minutes Mr. Amsel. Next was Mr. Kerr, and you and Mr. Goodwin came last, just before ten o'clock. I resented it when you were called in because we got there first and I thought we should be called first."

"Then we're still intact. When I said the limits are nine thirty and ten o'clock I ignored the possibility that when Mr. Goodwin and Miss Colt went for coffee one of them, or both, stopped in at room thirty-eight and killed him. Does anyone want to explore it?"

Sally Colt started to titter. It was a flaw in her, but I made allowances because it could have been the first time she had been at close quarters with a murder, and naturally she was strung tight. I came to the rescue. "Cross it off. I didn't, she didn't, and we didn't."

"Miss Colt?"

"Don't be silly!" Her voice was louder than necessary, and she lowered it. "No. Mr. Goodwin is correct."

"Good. He often is." Wolfe shifted in his chair. His rump had taken a lot of punishment since six o'clock that morning. "Presumably the police theory is that one of us, going along the hall on arrival, caught sight of Donahue, who could have opened the door of the room to look out, and proceeded to

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finish him. Under that theory we're at the crux. There couldn't have been time for a prolonged conversation unless the murderer entered the building much earlier than he arrived at room forty-two, and in that case the police will probably get him without any help from us. The point is that in all probability the mere sight of Donahue on those premises was enough to make the murderer resolve on his death forthwith. Do any of you qualify? I have reported to you fully and candidly on my association with that man. Did any of you have dealings with him?"

"I did," Dol Bonner said.

"Yes, Miss Bonner? Will you elaborate?"

"Certainly. I've told the police, so why not you?" There was an edge of scorn on her voice, either for Wolfe or for the others, no telling. "First, though, I left something out, not deliberately. When Miss Colt and I got to the third floor of that building I went to the women's room and she went on to room forty-two. It was twenty minutes to ten when I joined her there. The police know that too, of course. Also I heard a police detective telling a man—I think it was the district attorney—that all of us had recognized the body."

"Indeed." Wolfe's frown was about gone. "All of you?"

"That's what he said." Her eyes went to Ide, to Amsel, to Kerr, and back to Wolfe. "About my dealings with him, they were almost identical with yours. He came to my office last April and gave his name as Alan Samuels, and wanted me to arrange for a wire tap on the telephone at his home—a house in the Bronx—with exactly the same arrangement he made with you. I didn't have an Archie Goodwin to nudge me on, but I thought it wouldn't hurt any for me to learn something about wire tapping if I could do it legitimately, and I agreed to handle it if he would establish his identity. He showed me some papers—a driver's license and some letters—but I told him that wasn't enough."

She stopped to swallow. Evidently she wasn't any prouder of her performance than Wolfe was of his. "He said he had an account in a bank around the corner—my office is at Fiftieth and Madison—and asked me to go there with him. I had an appointment and couldn't leave the office, so I asked Miss Colt to go." She turned. "Sally, that's your part."

Sally wasn't looking very gay. "You want me to tell it?"

Dol Bonner said yes, and Sally gave Wolfe her eyes. From my angle, in the electric light, the blue in them didn't show; they looked almost as black as Amsel's. "Miss Bonner told me what was required," she said, "and I went with him around the corner to the Madison Avenue branch of the Continental Trust Company. He took

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me through the gate in the railing to where there were four men at desks, and went to one of the desks. There was a little stand on the desk with a name on it, Frederick Poggett. The client called the man at the desk Mr. Poggett, and shook hands with him, and told him that in connection with a business transaction he needed to establish his identity, and would Mr. Poggett please identify him. Mr. Poggett said of course, and turned to me and said, 'This gentleman is Mr. Samuels, a customer of our bank.' I said, 'Alan Samuels?' and he said yes, and then told the client that if it was a matter of credit he would be glad to verify his balance. The client said that wouldn't be necessary, and we left. We went back to the office and I reported to Miss Bonner."

She stopped and looked at Dol Bonner, who nodded and took the ball. "In my case, Mr. Wolfe, it wasn't his secretary he suspected, it was his brother who was living in his house, but that's just a detail. He paid me in cash, a thousand dollars, and I found out how to arrange for the tap and did so. He was to come to the office at five o'clock every day for the report. The morning after he had got the fifth report he phoned to say that he didn't need the tap any longer and asked if he owed me anything. I told him yes, another five hundred dollars, and in an hour or so he came in and paid it."

She made a little gesture. "I never did suspect him. I still say there was no reason to. But when all the publicity about wire tapping started, and then when we were told to report under oath any and all connections we had had with wire tapping, I went to the bank and spoke with Mr. Poggett, taking Miss Colt with me. He remembered the incident, of course. After going to look at the records, he told me that Alan Samuels had opened a checking account at the bank on February eighteenth, giving a business address on Lexington Avenue. He, Poggett, had attended to it. He wouldn't tell me either the amount or the references Samuels had given, but he did tell me that the balance had been withdrawn, closing the account, on April twentieth, which was the day after Samuels had canceled the tap, and I did get the Lexington Avenue address out of him. Of course I suspected I had been taken in, and I—do you want me to go on? My efforts to trace him?"

"Not unless you found him. Did you?"

"No. I never did. The next time I saw him was in that room today. Dead."

(Continued on page 88)

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A mother's grief can sometimes turn to hate . . .

THE CHILD WATCHER

by ERNEST HARRISON

ESTHER LOOKED DOWN AT THE BABY with interest. He lay in his crib, playing solemnly with his toes, his bright eyes intent on the one that stuck out at such an odd angle. Suddenly he tired of his researches, and turning over on his stomach tried to edge himself to the corner of his crib.

Though unable to smile, Esther felt a warm glow within her as a movement in her womb held out its promise of fulfillment. A flood of confused memories swept over her—the moment of ecstasy, the vague sadness which followed, and now the nearness of birth. These things could not be put into words, perhaps not even into thoughts, but the emotions ran strong in her. She looked down once more at the baby. Soon, the movement in her belly told her, soon she— Her thoughts broke off in a blurred image she could not quite capture.

The baby made an awkward turn, and his nappy pin opened. A sharp prick, and he was howling. The door opened within seconds, and the anxious mother swept into the room.

"My baby, my precious little boy . . . Diddums cry for mummy?" She picked him up in her arms and snuggled him to her breast. "Look, Esther, isn't he a *silly* little boy to cry for his mummy like that, when Esther is here?" A piercing howl as her hand pressed the pin into his skin again, and she discovered the cause of his complaint. All was contrition. "Oh, so that's it! Did *nasty* mummy hurt her little darling? There, there . . ." The words ran on without end.

Esther felt slightly sick.

Her first pains soon came, and then the joy of birth. It is easy to be cynical about the possessiveness of mother love, but nature imposes it at the very moment that a life comes into the world. And by the same token, once the first sound of a new breathing comes, there is bitterness if the life is snatched away . . .

It was later, and Esther once more looked down at the baby, but now there was envy in her heart. His mother had patted and cuddled him, unaware of Esther's turmoil. Now she had gone from the

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room, and Esther remained to watch the child.

She gulped slightly. The memories of ecstasy had faded. Vague thoughts tumbled through her mind. She recalled the pains vividly, and the cries of life. Then the joy, so abruptly ended. She did not understand death, or what distinguished it from life and left blackness in the heart. If the mother who had just left the room had thought of asking her, Esther would have remained dumb.

But she knew what hate was, and envy. The baby began to crow with pleasure. "Come," his look declared, "don't be sad, Esther. I don't know what makes you so unhappy, but the world isn't worth it. You'll forget, all right, just as I do. See, I've got a great big foot to show you...I know how mad mummy always makes you. She makes me mad, too. Sometimes, that is. Come *on,* Esther, snap out of it. Anway, I love you, don't I? Now, doesn't that make it up to you?"

Esther looked at him without expression, and he turned away to explore the pillow.

Without warning the hate in her heart overflowed. She knew suddenly what she wanted to do. She turned her head toward the door, listening carefully. There was no sound.

She turned back to the baby, watched his antics. She was still not certain how she would do it—only that she wanted to do it more than anything in the world.

The child's bottom stuck in the air, moving from side to side as he tried to push his head through the rails of his crib.

Esther passed the tip of her tongue through her lips, feeling a slight constriction at the throat. She moved forward, then stopped. The baby, finding his head was too large, pulled back, wriggled over onto his back.

He was about to put his feet up, touch them with his hands, when his eye caught Esther's expression. He raised his voice—a sudden, choking scream; and Esther fell upon him. The cry rose to a shriek. Pulsing with her whole hatred of the world, Esther tore madly at him.

The door banged open and the baby's mother rushed into the room. Esther whirled, at bay. But then she was struggling for her own life, being choked out of her by the woman who had drowned her newborn kittens.

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In this issue we begin a new and fascinating series of short historical detective stories. The author plans to use famous figures of history, in their own time and milieu, each enacting the role of a detective just once. What a delightful and diversified prospect!

This first story reveals an incident in the career of Captain Cook, the celebrated English naval captain and explorer, when in 1770 he was confronted with the murder of his bosun's mate during the expedition of the "Endeavour" in the South Pacific Ocean. Stories expected to follow will recount hitherto unknown detective exploits by world-famous authors, artists, inventors, statesmen, philosophers, scientists—perhaps even kings. (Is the whole scheme too ambitious? We sincerely hope not.) Imagine—a previously unchronicled episode in the life, say, of William Shakespeare—or a flight of deduction by none other than the great Leonardo da Vinci . . .

Happy reading!

CAPTAIN COOK, DETECTIVE

by THEODORE MATHIESON

ON THE NIGHT OF JUNE 11, 1770, fourteen months after His Majesty's Ship *Endeavour* had left England, and while she explored the waters three hundred miles off the coast of "New Holland," Captain James Cook was suddenly faced with a problem that he could not solve by quadrant or caliper.

It was two bells, most of the crew were below, and the captain slowly paced the afterdeck. He reached the starboard side, grasped the taffrail, and looked aloft to where the three masts of the sturdy sailing-ship rose black against the tropical moonlight, when he heard a cry from the ladder.

"Captain, sir," a voice said shakily from the shadows.

"Come up, Blore," Cook said, recognizing the voice of the quartermaster of the watch.

"It's Prout, sir, the bosun's mate. He's dead. I just found him midship, hanging over the rail. There's a knife in his back. I haven't touched him, sir."

Cook hesitated a moment, looking down at the deep, concealing shadows on the main deck. This could be a trick. The men had been

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giving trouble, wanting to turn back after New Zealand, saying he'd gotten what the Admiralty had sent him for—the transit of Venus. It was true. On Tahiti three months ago he'd made the observation which, when combined with measurements made by scientists at other points on the globe, would determine for the first time in history the distance from the earth to the sun.

But now the men were homesick. The captain had been forced, after the outbreak of a drunken, resentful riot in the forecastle, to cut the ration of grog to a fourth. The men were in a sullen, threatening mood.

"Prout has been drinking, sir," Blore said, clucking his tongue. "Smells like he's been wallowing in the hogshead."

Cook made his decision. "Bring him here," he said sharply. "Get Hicks the cook to give you a hand. I see the light in his galley."

"Yes, sir, but—" Blore half turned away.

"But what?"

"I think it might be Hicks that did it, sir, after what happened between them this morning."

"Get Hicks to help you," Cook repeated.

Ship's surgeon Monkhouse, a mountain of a man, stood beside his stubborn-lipped captain as Blore and the cook, Hicks, lowered the body gently to the deck. It was still flexible and warm, although the bearded face of the bosun's mate had had time to smooth out, so that he looked peaceful and unconcerned over his sudden and violent end. Probably he'd not even caught sight of his assailant before he died, although it was doubtful if he'd been able to recognize him if he had.

"Grog must be coming out his pores, sir," Monkhouse said. "Smell that."

"Ain't it something terrible?" Hicks, the wiry, whey-faced little cook said fervently. Fresh from the galley, his white apron gleamed in the moonlight.

At the captain's order Monkhouse leaned over and removed the knife from the dead man's back. He had a little difficulty, at which Blore made a choking sound and ran for the rail.

"An ordinary butcher's knife," the captain said. "Like one you use, Hicks, isn't it?"

"I wondered where it'd got to," the cook said, wetting his lips. "It's been gorn since last night."

The captain studied the little Cockney briefly, while the rigging creaked in the sway from the ocean swell.

"Come into the cabin, all of you," he said.

Inside the captain's cabin it was warm and close. Through the stern windows the moonlight could be seen coruscating upon the waves. The captain, a gaunt six-footer, lean of cheek and long of nose, stood for a moment in the stern

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alcove, seeming to tower over his men. Then he sat down at his writing desk and the others gathered round him, their faces white and tense in the light of the lantern swinging in brass gimbals over the desk. The captain's cat, Orleans, jumped on his master's lap and settled down undisturbed.

"You may sit down," the captain said, and as Blore entered belatedly, looking a sickly green, he admonished as an after-thought, "And *you* had better stay near the door." The captain swung around to the cook.

"What happened between you and Prout this morning?"

The unexpectedness of the question caused Hicks to gasp. Then his little black eyes narrowed and he slid them murderously towards Blore.

"I–don't quite know what you're gettin' at, Cap'n," Hicks said with a yellow-toothed smile. "Prout and I wasn't friends exactly, but–"

"I want to know what happened this morning."

"We had a little argument, that's all," Hicks mumbled.

"Perhaps I can tell you," Monkhouse the surgeon spoke up. "I went down to call on a patient during the noonday mess. Prout is–was–something of a bully. I think most the men can tell you that. He was always making Hicks here take back his food and get him something else."

"Couldn't please 'im anyhow!" Hicks said venomously.

"It's gone on for six months, now, sir," Blore spoke up from the door. "Today Prout became pretty violent and sent food back twice. Said Cooky was the worst slob of a cook that'd ever sailed in His Majesty's service. Cooky got mad and swung the iron frying pan at Prout's head. Would have killed him if Prout hadn't jerked away. The frying pan made a gash in the table you could put your hand into."

"But I didn't kill him, did I?" Hicks protested in a shrill voice.

"You tried to," the captain said quietly. "And as for being a bad cook, I've had occasion to send certain dishes back myself, if you recall."

"I do me level best," Hicks whined. "That's all a bloke can do, beggin' your pardon, Cap'n."

"There's only one reason that makes me think you didn't do it," the captain said, looking at Hicks as one might look at a cockroach sitting on a tablecloth. "You hated Prout all right–that's clear to all of us. But I think you'd like to have had him suffer a little for bullying you these six months. The knife would have been too quick for you, I think."

The cook nodded quickly. "That it would," he said.

"Especially since if you had merely reported Prout, who has obviously broached the hogshead, he would have been strapped to the bowsprit and you could have seen

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him die slowly of hunger and exposure. That was the fate I ordered, as you all know, for anyone found tampering with the grog."

"Aye, 'e's 'ad it too easy, I'd say!" Cooky said, sniffiing.

The surgeon stirred his heavy body and started to rise, then sat back again.

"There's still another one who might have done this," he said. "Although I—"

"No changing course now," the captain warned.

"It's young William Backus. First trip, has learned the ropes quickly. A likely lad . . . I hate to mention it, but in all fairness to Cooky here . . ."

"Backus wouldn't do it," Blore said quickly. "He's too nice a lad. Reads his Bible regular."

"But you think I did it!" Hicks cried shrilly, and the captain silenced him with a gesture. He turned back to the surgeon.

"But the lad had a grudge against Prout?"

"I'm afraid he did. The boy has his hammock next to Prout's. He'd try to sleep at night and Prout would push his foot against the lad's hammock. Prout didn't sleep well, so Will didn't get much sleep either. He tried to move away but Prout wouldn't let him. Finally the boy came to me but I told him to fight it out for himself. He did fight it out, but Prout beat him almost to a pulp, and then went right on keeping him awake."

Blore said suddenly, "Prout was just asking to be killed, Captain! None of the men could get on with him."

"Except you," the surgeon said blandly. "I saw you and Prout together now and then. Very friendly, you seemed."

"I always try to see the other man's side of it," Blore said with a quiet dignity. "Besides, I recognized Prout for the bully he was, and never took anything from him. First week out from Plymouth I fought him, and laid him out flat on the deck. We got on together fine after that, but I didn't seek out his company."

The captain sighed. He knew it would not do to let the murder go unpunished among a crew whose temper was reaching a lawless pitch. He would have to sift and question, to find the murderer and make an example of him.

"Bring me Backus," he said to Blore.

Blore went out with a show of reluctance, and the captain had barely time to turn to Hicks, whom he was on the point of dismissing, when the quartermaster of the watch was back in the cabin, with his mouth hanging open, breathing heavily.

"Well, what is it?" the captain demanded.

"It's Prout, sir. We left him on the deck out there, but there's no trace of him. The body's gone, sir."

At the captain's order Monk-

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house and Blore set about searching the ship unobtrusively for the corpse. From the heavy sprit to the boxy stern they looked, above and below deck, into the hollow cores of coils of hempen line, among the piles of uncut canvas, and between pyramids of oaken casks. They stumbled as noiselessly as they could manage over spars and blocks and pulleys and belaying pins. Breathing fetid air, they crawled on hands and knees in the forecastle beneath the hammocks of sleeping men. And at the end of two hours they concluded that the obvious solution had been the correct one: the body of the bosun's mate had been thrown over the side.

During the search Blore checked the spigot of the hogshead and found it still sealed, but another spigot, concealed by a bulkhead, had been thrust into the back of the cask. Prout had doubtless drunk his grog on the spot, not daring to carry it away in containers, for there was a quarter-filled mug in the shadow of a cask block. But for all his precaution the bosun's mate had overestimated his capacity, and if the murderer hadn't doomed him, his obvious condition would have.

Captain Cook found himself liking the boy Will Backus at once. He was tall, muscular, and blond, about nineteen, red-cheeked and clear-eyed, although there were telltale dark circles under his eyes. He entered the captain's cabin with evident anxiety, but was self-possessed.

"Sit down, Backus," the captain said curtly. "I suppose Blore has told you what happened to Prout."

"Yes, sir."

"I understand you and he were not the best of frieds."

The boy lowered his eyes and his lip trembled. "No, we were not, sir."

"Do you mind telling me why?"

Backus explained the trouble between him and the bosun's mate such as Monkhouse had done. When he had finished, the boy put his hand petitioningly on the captain's desk.

"Would you please believe me, sir," he said, "that although I had every reason to hate Mr. Prout, I made every effort not to feel that way towards him."

"So I understand. You're a great reader of the Bible, Mr. Blore tells me."

"Yes, sir. I promised my father I would read it and follow its precepts faithfully. I try to hate no man."

"But you'll agree that Prout made himself decidedly hateful to most of the men. And besides yourself, to the cook Hicks, particularly?"

"The Bible does not forbid that one should fail to recognize evil when he meets it. I believe Mr. Prout was evil."

"And deserved to be murdered?"

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"That would be God's decision, sir."

"And you would not think of being His instrument?"

The boy looked at the captain, paled, but did not answer.

"Answer my question."

"I believe, Captain Cook, that God often chooses His instruments to do—certain acts—on earth. But I swear to you, sir, that I did not kill Mr. Prout."

Captain Cook reached for his pipe, filled it, and when he had it going well, he asked, "Did you know that Prout was soddenly drunk when he was killed?"

"Mr. Blore did mention that, sir."

"And if you stepped up behind him to do him harm, and found him intoxicated, would you have reported him to your superior officer and have the ship's discipline punish him?"

"I cannot answer that, sir. I do not know."

"You do not know if it would satisfy God's justice to see Prout on the bowsprit, suffering day after day the pangs of starvation and thirst?"

"No, no!" the boy cried suddenly. "I could not want that. Nor would God want it."

Captain Cook pointed at the door of the cabin with the stem of his pipe.

"That will be all just now, Backus," he said.

The next morning the captain sat down wearily at his desk and took his journal from the drawer. With the sun warming his back, and the quill poised over the page, he sat staring at Orleans, curled upon his bunk.

There was so much more to be done, if the men could only understand. There were islands in these South Seas still unclaimed by Spain, Portugal, France, or Holland. There were unknown waters to chart, and most important of all, there was the possibility of discovering a new continent for the glory of Britain.

He sighed and began writing: "After staying up half the night interrogating the men and officers, I have come to only one conclusion. Only two men have *suffered* sufficiently at Prout's hands to have murdered him—Backus and Hicks. The others have been able to handle Prout, and one of them, Blore, seemed even to be friendly with him. Blore is a problem. Although he has no apparent reason for murder, and got on well with Prout, still he was the only one of those who first knew of Prout's murder (Monkhouse, Hicks, and myself) who was outside of the cabin long enough to have accomplished the removal of the body. Was he actually sick when the surgeon withdrew the knife, or was he pretending? The more I think about this, the more confusing it becomes. I shall keep Blore in mind, and for the moment add him to my list of possible criminals.

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"As I see it, the answer to Prout's murder lies in how each one of these three men—Hicks, Backus, and Blore—would *actually* react if they knew that by merely reporting Prout's dereliction the bosun's mate would be condemned to a slow death. It is certain, I think, that men often are of two kinds—pain-givers and pain-savers. Prout was killed suddenly, quickly, while deelp intoxicated. Without question all three men knew of the penalty of broaching the hogshead. That means that whoever murdered Prout, although he knew he might have had much more satisfaction out of seeing Prout languish on the bowsprit, preferred to kill him quickly and save him pain. The murderer, then, was a pain-saver. Now of these three men, who are the pain-savers and who are the pain-givers? Young Backus says that he is a pain-saver. Hicks is obviously a pain-giver. Blore, with his quiet ways and queasy stomach, would seem to be a pain-saver. Yet, how often does a man really know himself well enough to give an accurate description of his tendencies? *I cannot depend upon what these men say about themselves, or what they seem to me to be.*

"The only answer is to devise some sort of test and catch their reactions unexpectedly . . ."

The idea of the test came soon—as Cook watched his tabby, Orleans, playing with a pen that had fallen to the deck. The captain made his preparations, and on the evening following the murder he called Hicks into his cabin.

The cook had taken off his apron and slicked his hair in deference to the occasion. He stood smiling ingratiatingly in the doorway.

"Come in," the captain said affably. "I want you to feel at ease, Hicks. I'm not making any accusations. I just want to find out more about what happened last night, and I'd appreciate your help. Have a drink of brandy?"

Hicks lost his smile in bewilderment at this egalitarian treatment, but recovered sufficiently to bob his head at the invitation to imbibe.

As the captain carefully poured two brandies, a scratching from a wooden box set on the captain's desk attracted Hicks' attention.

"Orleans loves to play with a baby mouse now and then," Cook said casually. "And I enjoy watching the sport. You may look in."

Hicks nodded and peered down eagerly. Orleans held his young enemy lightly under his right paw.

"Of course, I believe in being fair about it," the captain said. "If the mouse manages to stay alive for the time it takes this hourglass to pour five minutes of its sand—to this mark—I let the mouse go."

"To plague the ship, Cap'n?"

"If he runs into you, of course, that's his misfortune. But he has earned his reprieve from me."

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Hicks nodded noncommittally and continued avidly to watch Orleans and his prize. The captain sat down and began asking questions about the night before—perfunctory questions which had already been asked, but Hicks, with his attention divided, didn't seem to notice. Once or twice Orleans chased the little mouse from corner to corner with a commotion that threatened to upset the box, but the captain paid no attention, and continued his questioning. Hicks grew more and more excited.

"There, that makes it time," the captain said finally, turning the hourglass over.

"Oh, not yet, Cap'n!" Hicks said pleading. "The cat hasn't begun to play proper yet."

"But the time is up."

"Please, Cap'n," Hicks said, his eyes on the box.

The captain waited deliberately, and a few seconds later Orleans pounced once more and a mortal squeal from the mouse told the story.

"There! 'e's damaged now, all right!" Hicks cried triumphantly.

"We waited too long," the captain sighed, and put the box upon the deck.

"Hicks is exactly what he appeared to be—a pain-giver," the captain wrote in his journal late that night. "And Backus didn't like the cat and mouse idea right from the start. He wouldn't even look, and I am convinced he was not shamming. He, too, was right about himself. Blore was the only one of the three who seemed to detect what I was about, and let me know it by his manner. He is an intelligent man, and I cannot be sure about his reactions. He looked on with little show of emotion, and when the time was up quietly agreed that I should terminate the struggle.

"I do not like what this leads me to surmise. It puts the boy Backus first in my suspicions, with Blore in the middle, and Hicks last. Unless I can think of another plan of investigation, I'm afraid we shall not uncover the truth about Prout's murder . . ."

The captain solved it the very next morning.

He sat at breakfast, looking through the stern windows at a huge island looming up on the horizon like a great cloud. He could hear the leadsman's chant as he sounded from the chains. "The existing maps do not show an island here," the captain was thinking. "We must investigate." Then his thought broke off like a thread. In the middle of a bite he crashed his cup of tea into the saucer, rose, and strode to the door of his cabin.

"Monkhouse!" he thundered at the surgeon who stood at the rail outside. "Get those three up here—Backus, Hicks, and Blore. Right away!"

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Too startled for words, the surgeon nodded and made for the ladder to the main deck. The captain withdrew to his cabin again, poured three small drinks, and placed them in a row on the table.

Blore was the first to arrive, wiping his hands on a cloth; he had been helping the botanists rearrange the specimens in their cabin.

"You called, Captain?" Blore asked mildly.

"All three of you, yes," the captain said grimly. "I think I have discovered a way of revealing the criminal."

"Will he give up that easily, sir?"

"Two of you will help me hold him should he become violent," the captain said, smiling.

Backus arrived, his hands still soapy from washing the companionway to the forecastle. His hair was touseled and his eyes wide with excitement.

"I came right away, sir," he said eagerly.

"Yes. Give him your cloth, Blore, and let him wipe his hands free of soap."

"Thank you, sir," Backus said, busy with the cloth.

And then Hicks came, not having bothered to remove his apron this time, nor slick back his hair.

"At your service, Cap'n," he said easily, presuming on the friendliness the captain had showed him the night before.

The captain closed the door, then stood up before the three of them.

"I wish you to drink with me—a little toast to the island we see ahead. It is uncharted, and possibly uninhabited."

The captain handed the three glasses to the men.

"Do not drink until I give the word," he said sharply, and then more slowly, "In a minute or two I think we shall find the criminal who murdered Prout. And when we do, he will have the choice of swinging from the yardarm or of being marooned on that island."

"You know who it is?" It was Backus, his voice sounding high and young.

"Yes, I think I do, Backus. All I need now is proof."

"How do you propose to get it, Captain?" Blore asked.

Hicks said nothing; his look was almost uncomprehending.

"I shall answer your question after you drink my toast," said the captain. "But first, I should be considerably hurt if you do not consider the bouquet of this fine brandy." The captain raised the glass to his nose and sniffed, and the others did likewise.

"Now drink," he said, and swallowed the contents of his own glass quickly. When he looked at the others, two of them stood gazing at him wonderingly, their glasses still full in their hands. The third was spluttering, his eyes watering, his glass empty.

"Don't you like vinegar, Hicks?"

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the captain asked quietly. *"If you had been able to smell it when you sniffed, perhaps you wouldn't have drunk it.* The others didn't. You murdered Prout, didn't you? You would have let the ship's punishment take care of him the long and painful way if you could have smelled his drunkenness the other night; but since you couldn't, you killed him the quick, merciful way, which was quite unlike you."

"You don't know what you're talkin' abaht, Cap'n," Hicks said, his cheeks wet with tears drawn by the vinegar. "I was inside the cabin with you when the body was moved. The murderer did that, so I ain't the murderer."

"Yes, you are, Hicks," Backus said quietly. "I saw you do it. But because you'd been bullied the way I'd been bullied, I threw Prout overboard so you wouldn't be blamed for it. I thought I was justified, but it's been a terrible weight on my conscience. Now that God has let Captain Cook see the truth, I cannot hide it any longer."

"You little rat!" Hicks shrieked and rushed frantically towards Backus. Blore seized the little man by the collar and held him firmly, cuffing him until his protestations ceased.

"You burnt my breakfast once too often," the captain said. "Anyone who burns food as often as you, Hicks, must have a defective sense of smell. So you gave yourself away, you see."

Later, when Blore and Backus were gone and Hicks was safely locked in the hold, the captain said to the surgeon.

"We exchange one mystery for another, Monkhouse."

"How do you mean?" the surgeon asked.

"Where in the devil are we going to find another cook?"

NEXT MONTH . . .

The newest Captain Heimrich case —

Frances & Richard LOCKRIDGES' *All Men Make Mistakes*

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

The normal purpose of this page is to recommend fiction; but two recent five-star volumes of non-fiction demand special notice.

F. Tennyson Jesse's MURDER AND ITS MOTIVES (British Book Centre, $3.50), greatly expanded from its 1924 version, is a profoundly illuminating study of character in 6 Nineteenth-Century murder cases; and Edgar W. Smith's THE INCUNABULAR SHERLOCK HOLMES (Baker Street Irregulars, $5) is a brilliant anthology of the earliest (and much of the best) scholarly investigation of the prototypical Great Detective.

★★★★ **NO ENTRY, *by Manning Coles*** (Crime Club, $2.95)
The incomparable Thomas Elphinstone Hambledon in his best adventure for over a decade, admirably blending broad spyjinks with the chill terror of the East-West German border.

★★★★ **UNTIMELY DEATH, *by Cyril Hare*** (Macmillan, $3.25)
Model of compactness, quiet wit, ingenious plotting, adroit misdirection. (English title: HE SHOULD HAVE DIED HEREAFTER.)

★★★ **AND FOUR TO GO, *by Rex Stout*** (Viking, $2.95)
Four Nero Wolfe novelets, 1956-58, a mite shorter than usual but just as meatily entertaining.

★★★ **THE NAKED VILLANY, *by Jocelyn Davey*** (Knopf, $3.50)
Period piece, set in 1937 and recounting Ambrose Usher's first case, which involves Bach MSS, kidnaped monkeys and a Dead Sea scroll. Almost as amusing a civilized jape as A CAPITOL OFFENSE (1956).

★★★ **BEARD THE LION, *by William Manchester*** (Mill-Morrow, $3.50)
Innocent pharmacologist finds himself in thick of Arab-Israeli counterespionage. Lively excitement in the school of Ambler.

Good mysteries easily survive a quarter of a century, as two of the all-time top mysterymongers show: John Dickson Carr in HAG'S NOOK and THE MAD HATTER MYSTERY, the earliest (1933) exploits of Dr. Fell (Berkley, 35¢ each); and Dorothy L. Sayers in STRONG POISON (1930), one of Lord Peter Wimsey's best cases (Harper, $3.50).

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As of the beginning of 1958, the name of A. B. Guthrie, Jr. is known chiefly for two novels — but what a pair of books they are! THE BIG SKY *was published in 1947, was wonderfully received, and eventually became a wonderful movie.* THE WAY WEST *continued the story of frontier life — at the time the West was opened — telling of an emigrant trek from Missouri to Oregon in the 1840s; this second book won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1949.*

Although born in Indiana, Mr. Guthrie grew up in the raw, small ranch town of Choteau, Montana, south of the Blackfoot reservation. He writes that "the West is in me, and always will be." He can still recall vividly how, as a boy, he read pioneer journals with his father and visited the sites of old buffalo runs and Indian encampments. After receiving his degree from the University of Montana in 1923, he wandered about for a few years, then became a reporter on the Lexington, Kentucky "Leader," and twenty years later was executive editor of that fine newspaper. More recently he has turned to his father's profession, teaching, but primarily he is a writer on a full-time basis, despite the fact that he has called writing "a desperate business." We think we know exactly what Mr. Guthrie means . . .

It is a privilege to offer you one of A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s "western" shorts — a tale, rich and redolent, in the great humorous tradition of Mark Twain and O. Henry.

THE CELEBRATED SKUNK OF THE MOON DANCE BAR

or, Shorty as a Personal Magnet

by A. B. GUTHRIE, JR.

THERE WERE FIVE MEN IN THE back room of the Moon Dance bar — three ranchers, a hay hand, and a cattle buyer — all idled by the rain that was beating outside. They had quit their pinochle game, the cards and chips lying forgotten on the green table, and were listening to old Ray Gibler who'd started on one of his stories.

Then Ray saw me, grinned and held out his hand. "How, Tenderfoot."

© 1951 by A. B. Guthrie, Jr.; originally titled "The Fraudulent Skunk"

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"I'll listen," I said to Ray. I took off my slicker.

"I was just talking. Ought to be making tracks."

One of the ranchers said, "You ain't gonna ride herd on no dudes today."

"My woman's probably on the nt for me."

"I'll buy a drink," I said.

Ray gave me his wide grin again. It made deep wrinkles in his leathery cheeks. "I don't like to get in the habit of refusin'."

I yelled to the bartender for a round. "What was this about a skunk?"

"Well, I'll tell you —"

Ray doodled the ice in his ditchwater highball with one horny finger . . .

It was Shorty, the sheepherder, had the skunk, and it happened right here, right in this bar, and there was rooms overhead just like now, only you boys wouldn't remember it, being still slick-eared.

Shorty was new to the town then, but it didn't take us long to find he was all sheepherder. Had a fine, steady thirst and a free hand with money. He had been herding for George I. Smith for five-six months when he decided he couldn't stand thirst nor prosperity any longer. He came to town, a sawed-off, humpy feller with a mop of black hair and a habit of talking to himself, like all herders.

He got fired up good the first day and kep' the blaze going maybe a week, while his whiskers stooled out and his clothes got dirtier and dirtier, and a man meeting him was careful to get on the wind side.

He slept all one day under the hitch rack in back of the Moon Dance Mercantile Company, and when he woke up that night he was just as dry as he was broke, which is as dry as a man can get. He tried moochin' drinks, going from one place to another, but he'd run out of credit, too, and all he got was a bad eye and good advice from the men who had his money.

I was right here — on business, you might say — that night when Shorty came in and asked if the roof didn't never leak.

Whitey Hanson said, polishing a glass, "It's leaked plenty. I set 'em up for you three or four times. Git out!"

Shorty tried to argue. "My money, you got it."

"Ah-h. Whyn't you git back on the job?"

There was a couple of curly wolves in the bar, along with Whitey and Shorty and me. Anyhow, they figured they was curly. One of them was Rough Red Rourke and the other Stub Behr. Seeing Shorty, they moseyed over. "*Ba-a-a*," Red said in his ear, loud enough to bust an eardrum.

"Way round 'em!" Stub yelled.

Red grabbed Shorty by the shoulder. "Them pore ewes are missin' you, sweetheart."

Together they ran Shorty limp-legged through the door and pitched

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him in the street. Shorty got up slow, talking to himself, and dragged off.

Whitey Hanson thought that was good stuff. He said thankee to Red and Stub and poured drinks on the house.

Must have been a couple of hours later — anyhow along towards midnight — when Shorty showed up again, and not alone neither. He had a skunk with him, carrying it along by the tail so it couldn't do business. Old-timers have seen that trick worked many a time in days before saloons got to be hideyholes for spooners. Of course we didn't know the skunk was Shorty's pet.

Red saw him first and a big, drunk smile came on his face. He couldn't see the skunk on account of Shorty was carrying it on the off side. "Hey, Stub," he said, "look what I see." Then he hollered, "*Ba-a-a-a!*" at Shorty, so loud the roof shook.

He made for Shorty, and Shorty saw him and a look came on his face. He swung the skunk around. "By damn!" he said.

Red stopped like he'd been butted by a bull. Stub was trying to slip out of sight.

"Way round 'em!" Shorty said, and pointed the skunk and held it low, so's its front feet almost touched the floor. "Git out, both you! Git!"

He hazed them around towards the door, still holding the skunk low, business end to. It takes an awful brave man to face up to a skunk. Red and Stub wasn't that curly. They got.

Shorty closed the door after them and headed for the bar like a trout for a hopper. This was the business he had come for. He held the skunk up. To Whitey he said, "Set 'em up or I set 'im down!"

"Sure, Shorty, sure. Don't set 'im down. Nice work, Shorty." Whitey came from behind the bar and stretched his arm away out and shook Shorty's loose fist. "Them fellers couldn't buffalo you, Shorty."

Some of the rest of us ambled up, not too close, and told Shorty he sure did shine. Shorty said, "Wasn't nuthin'. Wasn't nuthin'."

"It sure was, Shorty. Sure was."

I reckon all that glory was too much for Shorty. He wasn't used to compliments, but just to hearing sheep bleat and bartenders say hell no, they wouldn't trust him for a drink and why didn't he go to work. Yep, it must have been too much for him. Anyhow, he dropped the skunk.

Whitey jumped the counter like an antelope and tore out the back. Tubby Adams got squoze so hard in the doorway he swore his pants wouldn't fit for a month, being way big in the waist and way short in the leg. It must have taken us all of five seconds to clear out, leaving Shorty and his skunk in the saloon — with the whiskey.

Well, we got together outside, still breathing hard, and held a rump session by the front door. Whitey was there, of course, and me and two or three cow hands and the printer for the *Messenger*, who was celebrating on account of getting the paper out

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just one day late. We couldn't see inside; Whitey always kept the shades drawn and the place dim-lit.

"Boys," Whitey said, hearing a cork pop, "we got to get him out of there."

One of the cow hands — Pete his name was, Pete Gleeson — said, "I could open the door just a crack and shoot the skunk if I had sump'n to shoot him with."

"I can't have the place stunk up," Whitey said quick. "I gotta think about my customers. I gotta think about the hotel. Ain't anyone wants to drink or sleep in a stunk-up place." He gave us an anxious look.

"I couldn't guarantee to shoot him dead first crack," the cow-poke said.

"I figure the place is already stunk up," I told Whitey.

He put his nose to the keyhole. "Maybe not. I can't smell nothin' yet. Maybe that skunk's used to Shorty." He raised his voice. "If you don't come out, Shorty, I'll have to get the law." He waited for an answer. "I'll get the sheriff."

From inside we heard Shorty holler, "Way round 'em, Shep."

"That settles it. I will get the sheriff," Whitey said. "You fellers stand guard." He moved off down the street, making for the jail.

After a while he came back, bringing Sheriff McKenzie with him. I had an idea he had been chewing McKenzie's ear off on the way.

"All right, Sheriff," Whitey said when they came up to us.

McKenzie gnawed on his mustache. "Now, Whitey, let's augur on this. What you want me to do, anyway?"

"Get Shorty and the skunk outta my place of business, that's what," Whitey told him. "And no stink!"

"It's a big order, Whitey, a mighty big order," the sheriff said.

Whitey never did like the sheriff much. "The taxes I pay, looks like you would have an idea."

"Your paying taxes don't seem to help me much right now."

"You got a reputation as a fast man with a gun. Anyhow, you used to have. But watch you don't hit my new mirror."

McKenzie chewed his whiskers some more. "I don't know. I wouldn't say I was *that* fast."

Tubby Adams said, "Try persuadin'. Looks like Shorty would feel plumb agreeable by now."

The sheriff walked up to the door. "This here's the law, Shorty. This here's the sheriff. You gotta come outta there, Shorty. Best come peaceful. Best not make a stink."

What he got back was a song, or a piece of it. It sounded real pretty there in the dark.

"*He's a killer and a hater!*
He's the great annihilator!
He's a terror of the boundless prairie."

"Don't look like I'm doin' any good," McKenzie said, turning around to us. He tried it again. "I don't want no trouble, Shorty. You gonna make me come in and git you?"

This time Shorty answered, "Yah."

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The sheriff backed away. "This is serious, sure enough." He kept bitin' his whiskers and got an idea. "We'll just throw open the door and let the skunk come out by his-self."

We all looked at each other. It wasn't for nothin' we had put McKenzie in the sheriff's office, you bet. McKenzie put his hand on the knob while the rest of us got ready to light out. Only the knob wouldn't turn. Shorty wasn't as dumb as you might think.

"You get any smell?" Whitey asked.

McKenzie put his snoot to the keyhole. "Yep."

"Oh, hell!"

"Rotgut," the sheriff said. "The stink of plain rotgut. Nothin' else. Reckon that skunk's ashamed of his equipment by comparison."

Tubby hitched his pants. "Long as you won't let anybody shoot that woods pussy, ain't nothin' to do but starve Shorty out."

"Starve 'im out!" Whitey bawled. "Starve him out, you damn' fool! You think he'll want to eat?"

"I hadn't give proper thought to that," Tubby answered.

The printer swallowed another hiccup. "Have to wait till the well runs dry."

Whitey clapped his hands to his head.

"I could use a drink myself," the sheriff put in.

Come to think of it, all of us could. From here on we began to think deep.

I called the boys away from the door so's Shorty couldn't hear. "Ain't there a way to poison skunks? What they eat, anyhow?"

"Chickens," Tubby answered. "Damn 'em!"

"I hear tell they eat frogs and snakes," the printer said.

While we were thinking frogs and snakes, Shorty began on another tune.

"Drink that rotgut, drink that rotgut,
Drink that redeye, boys;
It don't make a damn wherever we land,
We hit her up for joy."

"A frog now," Tubby said while he scratched his head with one hand. "Or snakes. Then there's the poison."

"I guess it ain't no trouble for you to put your hand on a frog or a snake any old time," Whitey said.

"My boy's got himself a collection. I don't figger he'd mind partin' with a frog or a snake." Tubby licked his mouth. "Not in a good cause, anyway."

"It might work," the printer said. "Worth tryin'."

So Tubby said he'd get a frog, and Pete Gleeson — that was the cow hand — said he'd rout the druggist out and get some strychnine.

By and by they came back, Tubby holding a little old frog that was still mostly tadpole and Pete bringing powdered strychnine in a paper bag.

"First," said Sheriff McKenzie, taking charge of things, "we got to poison the frog. Pry his mouth open, one of you."

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We gave the frog a good pinch of poison, with a drop of water for a chaser, and nosed him up to the crack and tried to goose him in. No go. That frog wouldn't budge.

After a while we found out it was because he was dead already.

"The frog idea ain't so good," the sheriff said. "Even with a live frog, it wouldn't work. A frog moves by hoppin'. How's he gonna hop *under* a door? Just bump his head, is all. Sumpn quick and slithery would be the ticket, like a snake."

"And don't poison him inside," I said. "Poison him out."

" 'Nother thing," Pete Gleeson put in. "Roll 'im in something sticky first, like flypaper."

You can see we was all thinkin' dry and hard.

Tubby went back to the house and got a garter snake, and Pete waked the druggist up again to get a sheet of flypaper. The druggist came along with him this time, figuring it wasn't any use to try to sleep.

Tubby and the sheriff didn't mind handlin' the snake.

The strychnine clung fine to the flypaper stickem, and the stickem clung fine to the snake. You never saw a snake like that one! All powdered up pretty, with a kind of a flounce around the neck where the strychnine was extra thick. You would have thought it was going to a wedding.

It could still crawl, though. Tubby pointed it at the crack and let go, and it slipped inside slick as butter.

Shorty was singing *Red Wing* now, only you could tell he had already sung his best and didn't have much class left in him.

"How long," asked Whitey, "does it take strychnine to work?"

The druggist chewed the question over with himself and came out with, "Depends."

"We'll give 'er plenty of time," Whitey said. "I won't open the place till mornin'."

"We done a lot of thinkin' for you," Tubby said, looking at Whitey sad-eyed. "Got a frog, too, and a snake."

"All right. All right, I'll set 'em up in the morning." Whitey talked as if it hurt him.

So we all dragged away, figuring, of course, to be on deck come opening time, which we were.

Whitey had the sheriff with him again, and there was all the rest of us, plus quite a crowd who'd heard about the doings.

"Might have to break the door down," Whitey said. "I can't unlock her if she's locked from inside." He turned to McKenzie, "Sheriff, do your duty."

The sheriff waited a while, as if to show he wasn't taking orders from the likes of Whitey. Then he up and turns the knob and the door swung open.

It was just like we'd left it, the place was, except for a couple of empty bottles. No Shorty. No skunk. No snake. No nothing. It was just like we'd left it, except Whitey's new

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mirror was busted all to hell, which made us feel awful sorry for him. Business took up as usual.

Ray drained his glass. "I was tellin' the boys before you came in it was a stinkless skunk. Been separated from his ammunition, you might say, though we didn't know it, of course. The place didn't smell a bit worse than it does now."

"You mean the skunk ate the snake and went off and died, and so Shorty left?" I asked.

"Oh, no. That wasn't the way of it at all. What happened was we cured Shorty. He had picked up his skunk and lit out. Never touched a drop afterwards. He said he'd seen snakes plenty of times while drinkin', but by grab when he saw one with frostin' on it, it was time to quit."

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

One of the great triumvirates in the mystery field —

AGATHA CHRISTIE's	*Hercule Poirot, Armchair Detective*
JOHN DICKSON CARR's	*The Footprint in the Sky*
G. K. CHESTERTON's	*The Absence of Mr. Glass*

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Especially for devotees of Saki, John Collier, and Roald Dahl . . .

INCIDENT AT A BAR

by CHARLES GREEN

TEN MINUTES EARLY WHEN I reached the corner where I was to meet Peggy, I ducked in for a drink at the nearby Burnett Arms. There were only two people at the semicircular bar—a fleshy, slab-faced woman and a gray-haired man who had his nose in a newspaper. I settled down between them, ordered a highball, sipped it, and thought I sure as hell might have picked a more cheerful spot.

Then came the diversion of the little dog. It announced its presence with a bark, and I glanced over my shoulder to see a pure-white, miniature French poodle standing just inside the lobby entrance to the bar. A moment later someone called from the lobby and the poodle bounce-trotted out, offering a wonderful rear view of furry little white pants.

I was grinning when I turned around. Noticing that the man at my right also looked amused, I said, "Cute little devil, wasn't he?"

"Yes," the man nodded. He had a pleasant smile, and his eyes were intelligent. "That one seemed very highly bred. Reminded me of Franchot, Christine Harmon's famous Blue Ribbon champion."

"I beg your pardon," the woman chimed in, "but are you referring to *the* Christine Harmon who's about to marry Prince Katayeff?"

The man blinked and said warily, "Why, yes, I am."

"Oh, do you *know* Miss Harmon?"

"Only as a client."

"A client?"

"I executed a commission for her last month."

She leaned forward, her bosom shelving over the bar. "Really? A commission, you say?"

The man sipped his drink, set down the glass, and said shortly, "Yes, a commission." Then he put his nose back into his newspaper. It was, I thought, rather silly optimism on his part. Not with *that* look in *that* woman's eyes.

"Have you met Prince Katayeff?" she persisted.

His shoulders hunched a bit, but his eyes remained on his newspaper as he replied, "I have. He accompanied Miss Harmon when she came to my studio."

That was an error. She pounced. "Your *studio?* Oh, you're an artist. You know, I have had the feeling your face was familiar. May I ask your name?"

He looked up and said in a low

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even voice, "Certainly, Madame. I'm Stephen Carver, and I'd like to add that—"

"Stephen *Carver*!" she cried, wide-eyed. "Well, for heaven's sake! Mr. Carver, my husband and I have admired your work for *years*. But passionately!"

I made a mental note to ask Peggy, the intellectual half of our family, to give me some data on Stephen Carver. I didn't recognize the name—which, of course, was no reflection on Mr. Carver's reputation.

"To think that I've actually met the great Stephen Carver!" the woman gushed on, her soft fluid bulk a-quiver. "Naturally, it *would* be a Master who'd do Christine Harmon. I am Mrs. Herbert Lester Phelps of Lynnville, Michigan."

Carver folded his newspaper and leaving his drink unfinished got up off the stool.

"It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Phelps," he said. "And now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Oh no you don't!" Mrs. Phelps said, repulsively kittenish as she wagged a forefinger. "Not when I was *just* about to ask you— Incidentally, Mr. Carver, my husband is president of the Lynnville Trust Company and owns controlling interest in several corporations. And —Herbert has always wanted to have me done. By a Master. We plan to stay in New York three weeks longer. Please, Mr. Carver, would you, as a very *special* sort of favor, consider doing me?"

For a moment I thought Carver would make a dash for the exit. His face was strained, and a nervous tic twitched his left eyelid. But evidently a good wad of Lynnville, Michigan greenbacks was an attraction he couldn't pass up. He settled on the stool again.

"Yes," he told Mrs. Phelps, "I'm willing to consider it."

"Oh, thank you so much," she panted. "When my friends in Lynnville see me immortalized by the same artist who did Christine Harmon— Please, Mr. Carver, you *will* do it, won't you?"

His eyes were narrowed, speculative, as they studied the woman. He was interested, no question about it. And that baffled me. What was there about this female Babbitt to throw a painter into a tizzy? A big, fat, powdery, middle-aged woman. A pushy bore, a snob. Besides, there were thousands like her.

"It could be a—masterpiece," Carver said quietly. "The greatest thing I've ever done."

"*Mister* Carver!" the woman said, almost drooling. "Oh, I'm so excited. Please excuse me while I dash out and telephone Herbert. I'll be back in a minute."

I watched her waddle out, then I said to Carver, "It's none of my business, of course, but does she really inspire you as much as all that?"

"As a matter of fact, she does,"

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Carver replied softly. He slid off the stool and I was surprised to see a sheen of sweat on his thin, clever face. "You know," he went on, "I consider myself a civilized human being. And yet I find there's a terribly thin line of demarcation between—damn it, it *is* fascinating!"

"What?" I said. "What're you talking about?"

"Good God, I'm not a painter. My name meant nothing to Mrs. Phelps, and as far as I know there isn't any famous painter named Stephen Carver. That stupid woman was just pretending to be in the know—just showing off."

"Let's stop right there," I suggested. "What *do* you do, Mr. Carver?"

"I'm a taxidermist," he said. "The commission I executed for Miss Harmon was to mount several trophies she brought back from an African safari."

It took a few moments before it seeped in, then the bar and I made a wild loop together. When things leveled off again, I saw that Carver was still facing me, but his eyes were turned inward—eyes that now had the moist glitter of someone in high fever.

Thinking aloud, in a voice just above a whisper, he said, "There would be certain technical difficulties—yes. Hairless human skin. Its preservation. The natural flesh tint. Of course, Edna's complexion is quite sallow, so that would help. And if one began by following the hairline, carefully scalping the specimen—"

I said, "Mr. Carver!"

He jarred out of it, his nostrils dilating as he now stared at me. "What?" he said. "Oh! It was just a thought, you understand. A mad, sick, exhilarating thought. Excuse me, but I *am* rather late for an appointment."

He brushed past me and hurried out of the place.

I looked at the spot where Mrs. Phelps had been sitting. *She* did not have a sallow complexion. Nor had she told him her first name. So who was Edna? Someone who'd be facing Stephen Carver across the dinner table, making homey small talk, while he studied her and pondered over—certain technical difficulties? Was it Carlyle who said that the thought was parent to the deed?

At this point I decided that I too had better get out of there. Brother, the cold air felt good. And it was good to see Peggy swing around the corner . . . As he said, it was just a mad, sick, exhilarating thought. He wouldn't *do* anything about it. Of course he wouldn't.

Or—would he?

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**GERALD WEALES**
TITLE:	***Fate and Aunt Lucyanne***
TYPE:	Fortunetelling Story
LOCALES:	Calebsville, Indiana, and New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*For all her interest in divination, Aunt Lucyanne was sharp, shrewd, and realistic; she always spoke her mind and she faced the future squarely . . . A beautifully written tale.*

IN A WAY, I SUPPOSE, I AM RESPONSIBLE for the death of Aunt Lucyanne. If I had not insisted that she come all the way from Calebsville to New York for a visit, if I had not suggested dinner that night in a Chinese restaurant, she might still be alive. Still, she was eighty-three when she died, not exactly snapped off in her prime, and she would have been the first to admit that her death was the one that Fate intended for her.

Fate was an intimate of Aunt Lucyanne's. She understood the way he worked and depended on it. She did not speak casually of him the way so many people do in the face of a situation where no words apply. If a neighborhood boy was killed in an automobile accident or a girl down the block was taken with a surprise pregnancy, Aunt Lucyanne would never have thought to say, "Well, it's fate." To her, he was always with a capital letter, and she ordinarily knew what he was up to before it happened.

She was a wonderful aunt for any child to have. When I was a boy she was already a widow, living alone, childless, in her big old house at the end of Merry Street. My sister and I went regularly to have our palms read. "This is your love line," she would say to Belle, and her face would crinkle just short of a smile as she went on to predict a husband and children. Sometimes she read the cards. On specific occasions, when we were planning a trip or a party, she would cast a horoscope for us,

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searching out the propitious day.

The people who used to come to see Aunt Lucyanne at her house were even more fascinating to me than the glimpses that she gave us into the future. I used to sit on the deep cool porch, almost hidden in one of the big wicker chairs, and listen to the conversations between Aunt Lucyanne and her strange visitors. There was a very old man with uncut gray hair and a busy gray mustache who drove a Model T Ford and wore always, winter and summer, the same dirty blue overcoat; he was the one who brought Aunt Lucyanne her dream books. There was Marie, a tiny wrinkled Negro woman, who always carried a bag of herbs and roots that she had gathered in the woods at the edge of town where she lived in the one room of an old unpainted house. When she came, Aunty Lucyanne would say, "You stay here, Ben," and the two of them would go into the kitchen and brew special tea. Medicinal, my mother used to say, but I think that Aunt Lucyanne and Marie read the future in the fumes that the kettle gave off.

Best of all, Miss Lena Gaveline came. She was a spinster who lived on my block and there I thought of her only as the shrill angry voice that kept insisting that I get out of her yard. At Aunt Lucyanne's, however, she was half of an argument that had been going on for years. Miss Lena believed in talking to the dead—"the dear departed," she called them. She held séances in her house once a week and she always came to Aunt Lucyanne's the day before each séance to try to convince my aunt to join the group. Their exchange was almost a ritual.

"Now, look here, Lucyanne," she would begin, "you do believe in the spirit world?"

"Of course I do, Lena. I'm no fool."

"We do get through to them, you know."

"I don't doubt you, Lena. I just have nothing to say to the spirit world."

"I talked to Billy last week." That was Aunt Lucyanne's dead husband who, according to the stories that even the children heard and believed, had courted Miss Lena before he met and married my aunt. "He wants to talk to you, Lucyanne."

"I never listened to Billy when he was alive and I'm not going to start now that he's dead."

Miss Lena shivered. "Can't you say *departed?*"

"Dead's dead, as far as I can see. It's what I've always said and it's what I'll go on saying."

"You are awful, Lucyanne." At this point Miss Lena always gave a little whimper. "It's such a comfort to talk to friends on the other side. I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't talk to my dear departed father."

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"Do! You'd do the same as now —make a fool of yourself." These words were the signal that Miss Lena always waited for. On hearing them she would get up and mince off in anger, followed by Aunt Lucyanne's final shout. "You know I don't care about the dead, Lena. I only want to know the future."

In her concern to know the future Aunt Lucyanne was not credulous. She was as critical of most fortunetellers as she was of Miss Lena's trafficking with the dead. She was difficult to convince, but she was insatiable. She made an annual trip to the fortuneteller at the County Fair, and she managed to get to every carnival that played within a radius of twenty miles. Professional fakers, she considered them, too likely to predict cheerful things so that the customers would go away feeling that they had got their twenty-five-cents' worth. Still, she visited them all and sifted and sorted what they told her, discarding the obvious fancy additions and believing what sounded genuine. She got so that she knew most of the regulars who played our part of Indiana and as often as not she spent her quarter just to have a chat with them.

She took me with her once when there was a new palmist at the fair. Madam Something-or-other, she called herself. "About as gypsy as Lena Gaveline," Aunt Lucyanne whispered to me as we entered the tent. The fortuneteller was a big woman, dressed in the usual soiled drapery. She was so painfully amateur that she could not have fooled me, and with Aunt Lucyanne she did not have a chance.

"Sit," the woman said. "Sit." We sat.

"Is it you or the boy that I am to read?"

"Me," my aunt said. "The boy has a regular palmist of his own." She winked at me.

The woman took my aunt's hand and looked at the palm carefully, her brow contorted in what she hoped was an indication of concentration. "Here," she said in a sepulchral voice, "is the life line." She ran a dirty-nailed finger across my aunt's palm.

"No, it isn't," said Aunt Lucyanne. "*This* is the life line." She pointed. "You know, maybe I'd better read you."

The big woman was startled into a spluttered explanation. "You know this palmistry is not really my . . ." she hesitated, looking for the word that would not incriminate, ". . . my specialty."

"What do you do?" my aunt asked. "Cards?"

"Do you read cards, too, madame?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

The woman smiled. "I use a ball."

"Good," said Aunt Lucyanne. "Let's have it."

"It costs extra."

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"We can afford it. Can't we, Ben?" I agreed. I had never seen a fortuneteller work a crystal ball.

The preparations were elaborate. The big woman moved deliberately as she placed the base on the table, carefully unwrapped the ball, and settled it in front of her. She passed her hands across it several times and began a spiel. "The ball sees all and knows all. Here lies the past, the present, and the future. Here . . ."

"Skip the past," Aunt Lucyanne interrupted. "I already know it."

The woman started again. "I see a change in your life . . ."

"If it's the one I'm thinking of," Aunt Lucyanne grinned, "I'm long past it."

So the session went. The woman continued to trot out the familiar predictions and Aunt Lucyanne continued to puncture them as they appeared. The fortuneteller became more and more annoyed. Finally she looked sharply at me for a moment and then back to Aunt Lucyanne.

"I see a coffin."

Aunt Lucyanne stiffened. She became suddenly alert, "Go on. Go on."

"I see great sorrow. I see a small coffin . . . I can see no more."

A chill ran along my back. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry out. Aunt Lucyanne got slowly, sadly to her feet and paid the fortuneteller. The woman was obviously pleased by my aunt's reaction; she thought she had got a little of her own back. Aunt Lucyanne took my hand and led me from the tent.

Her manner frightened me. Finally I whispered, "She means me, Aunt Lucyanne. She means me."

"She *thinks* she means you, Ben, but she doesn't. It's Marie, the lady that brings me herbs. She's sick, you know. It will have to be a little coffin for Marie."

I was so relieved when the death sentence was lifted from me that I began to see the whole thing in the light of the woman's early clumsiness. "But she couldn't really know, Aunt Lucyanne. She wasn't a real fortuneteller, was she? She was a faker."

"Yes, Ben, she was a faker. But she was telling the truth. Fate is ready to let death take Marie. When he gets ready to make his pattern clear, he uses any means he can. A faker can accidentally let us see the truth. All ways into the future are blocked by cheats and frauds and unbelievers—but sometimes we can see through them."

Marie did die and did get her tiny coffin and Aunt Lucyanne, who loved her very much, did have a great sorrow. The fortuneteller had predicted the future. I did not know then that Aunt Lucyanne had quite consciously wrenched the prophecy away from me, saving me in her own mind, turning it to someone who was more ready for it. It was not until I was fifteen,

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not until Mrs. Ida Glenn came to tell fortunes in Calebsville, that I realized Aunt Lucyanne had consistently manipulated the premonitions she received and the predictions she heard, that she had read them as if they were oracles that needed interpretation—her interpretation.

Mrs. Glenn was a traveling fortuneteller of a special kind; she used none of the mumbo jumbo of the trade. She came to town one day and settled at our only hotel. There she received clients, by appointment only, and she asked that they bring friends with them so that there would be no question of trickery of any kind. Her predictions were almost all lugubrious—intimations of approaching death or sickness or divorce. She knew apparently what the average fortuneteller does not—that bad news is a more certain draw than good, that the confirmation of expected unhappiness is somehow gratifying. The women flocked to her, eager to hear the worst, although each one felt, too, that she would be one of the lucky exceptions to whom a dribble of hope was allotted. It was not simply Mrs. Glenn's prediction that attracted people—it was the calm and matter-of-fact way in which she delivered them.

When Aunt Lucyanne went to her one day, taking me and Miss Lena as witnesses, Mrs. Glenn met us in her sitting room; she had the only suite in the hotel. She was a beautiful woman, dark and without make-up, and she was dressed simply in black silk. She seemed exciting to my fifteen years, mysterious and exotic, but her manner was very ordinary. It was almost as if we had dropped in for tea. We sat quietly in the room and for almost an hour she and Aunt Lucyanne chatted like friends. The conversation seemed to be going in no direction in particular. Finally, almost as if she were offering a second cup, she said, "Now, I suppose, you would like to know your future."

Aunt Lucyanne said she would. Mrs. Glenn did nothing unusual. She simply looked steadily at Aunt Lucyanne and said in a conversational tone, "I see nothing but death."

The simplicity of her delivery was masterful. Suddenly the sunlit sitting room was full of mist and uncertainty. Miss Lena shivered and I felt cold as stone. Aunt Lucyanne, however, accepted the information as it was given. What she wanted was clarification. "Do you mean you see my death?"

Mrs. Glenn hesitated, as though she were looking for the precise words. "I see nothing but death in your house."

We were all silent for a moment. Aunt Lucyanne and Mrs. Glenn broke the stillness at the same time, speaking now the familiar pattern of social farewells. Aunt Lucyanne

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handed Mrs. Glenn her fee and thanked her for her time; Mrs. Glenn in turn regretted that her predictions could not have been more cheerful. They parted politely, even amiably.

We went without speaking down the stairway, across the lobby, and out into the street. There Miss Lena found her voice. She put her pale thin hand on Aunt Lucyanne's arm, a gesture of cold comfort. "Oh, Lucyanne," she said, her voice shaking. "Oh, dear, dear Lucyanne." She patted the arm rhythmically.

"What is all this 'dear, dear Lucyanne' nonsense, Lena?" Aunt Lucyanne's voice was strong and amused. I was almost as startled as Miss Lena; I had been sharing her advance mourning.

"But, dear," she persisted. "Mrs. Glenn said that you were going to . . . to pass over."

"Nonsense!" said Aunt Lucyanne. "She said that she saw nothing but death in my house. She's right." The words were obviously an introduction; Miss Lena and I waited for what was to come. "You know, Lena—as you know, Ben—that Cy Garrett has been trying to get me to sell him my house. Cy needs a big place like mine; that place he's got is too little for an undertaking business as big as his. I can buy a little house that I can take care of more easily. So I'll sell, and Mrs. Glenn's prediction can come true and no one gets hurt."

Miss Lena's comfort turned to anger. "You're awful, Lucyanne! You are completely awful. You always twist predictions. You never abide by them. I think you're awful."

She stamped off down the street, almost as if Aunt Lucyanne had cheated her by refusing to die. My aunt shouted after her, "Not yet, Lena. You'll have to wait a few years before you talk to me at one of your silly séances." Miss Lena's back showed that she had heard.

Aunt Lucyanne and I walked on. I thought of the fortuneteller of long ago who had tried to pin me down and of Mrs. Glenn. "Is it true, Aunt Lucyanne," I asked. "Is it true, what Miss Lena says?"

"Not quite, Ben. Not exactly. If a prophecy is vague, it means that Fate gives you several chances. You can't beat it, but if you can solve it you sometimes save yourself."

"But are they never true?"

"This one was true, but just not true the way Lena thought. When the message is no longer doubtful, then I'll believe. When I look a prediction directly in the face and see that it is for me and that it can mean just one thing, then I'll accept. I won't fight then, Ben, but Fate hasn't yet let me know what he plans to do with me."

Aunt Lucyanne continued to get ambiguous messages from Fate. I continued to grow up and went off to war, to college, finally to a job

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and a wife in New York, while Aunt Lucyanne kept on trying to see what the future held. In time she was all that was left of my family in Calebsville, and I seldom got back to see her. Finally—it had been five years since we had seen each other—I convinced her that she should come to New York.

When Margaret and I met her at the train, she came skipping down the platform as if she were not a day past sixty. She seemed smaller than I remembered, but her body was tight and wiry under the new dress that she had bought for the trip, and her face lined but solid beneath the frivolous new hat.

"You look wonderful, Aunt Lucyanne." I said, kissing her. "You still haven't had any clear word from Fate?"

"Nothing I could count on." She laughed. She caught my hand the way she had when I was a boy, but now it was I who was doing the leading. I carried her bag in my free hand and we went off in search of a taxi.

"What do you want to do first?" I asked. "Go hunt crystal balls?"

"Not yet," she said. "First, I'm hungry. Is it polite to say so?"

"It's sensible, anyway," said Margaret. She took Aunt Lucyanne's free hand, and since Aunt Lucyanne let it stay, I knew it was all right between the two of them. Margaret went on, "We thought we might eat out somewhere, unless the trip made you tired."

"Don't be silly. I sat all the way."

"Out, it is, then," I said. "What do you want to eat? Something solid and midwestern?"

"Don't be foolish, Ben. I'm eighty-three years old and on my first visit to New York. I want something fancy and new and strange."

"French?" asked Margaret. "Italian? Jewish? Spanish?"

"They all sound good to me," Aunt Lucyanne laughed.

"No," I said. "I think it ought to be Chinese."

We went to a Chinese restaurant on upper Broadway, a place that does not advertise and does not need to, since its customers are legion and faithful. Aunt Lucyanne was delighted with shrimp in lobster sauce and sweet and sour pork and Chinese dumplings. Then came the kumquats and the cookies.

"What kind of cookie is this?" she asked, picking up one of those paper-thin, paper-tasting fold-overs that have printed fortunes inside them.

"It's just your speed, Aunt Lucyanne," I said. "It's a Chinese fortune cookie. Tear it open and you'll find your fortune printed on a little piece of paper inside."

She fingered the cookie for a moment, then she said, "You first, Ben."

I broke my cookie open and read aloud from the tiny paper, *"Your talent will soon be recognized."*

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"You next, Margaret," said Aunt Lucyanne.

Margaret opened hers. "Well, this is short and sweet." She read, *"Great wealth soon."*

Aunt Lucyanne carefully broke off the end of her cookie. She stuck a bit of the pastry into her mouth, wrinkling her nose at its tastelessness. She slowly smoothed out her fortune. She looked at it for a moment, a slight frown around her eyes. Then her mouth moved weakly, as though she wanted to say something. But no words came out. She lifted the hand that held the piece of paper, pushing it toward me, but before I could take it, she fell forward across the table. Her head glanced off one of the Chinese cups, spilling tea in all directions. Margaret cried out in fright. The small restaurant became suddenly full of running feet and staring eyes. But nothing could be done for Aunt Lucyanne. She was dead. I was so stunned that I could not move; without thinking, I took the piece of paper from the dead woman's hand.

It was one of those flukes that happen sometimes in Chinese restaurants. Somewhere a baker of Chinese cookies had made a mistake.

The piece of paper was completely blank.

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TOO MANY DETECTIVES

by REX STOUT

(Continued from page 56)

"You didn't see him alive first?" asked Wolfe.

"I did not," said Dol Bonner.

"Wouldn't it have been a simple matter to check on your suspicion—either confirm it or allay it?"

"Oh." Dol Bonner was taken aback. "I left that out. Of course I went myself to the address in the Bronx. A man named Alan Samuels lived there, but he wasn't the same man."

"Did you tell him of your—uh, inadvertent invasion of his privacy?"

"No. I admit I should have, but I didn't. I was sick of it."

"Did you inform yourself about him—his occupation, his standing, his interests?"

"No. What good would that do?"

"What is his address?"

"I don't . . ." She hesitated. "Is that important?"

Wolfe was frowning at her again. "Come, Miss Bonner. When a Bronx phone book will probably supply it?"

She flushed a little. "It merely seems to me that it's immaterial. Twenty-nine seventy Borchard Avenue, the Bronx."

Wolfe turned. "Archie. Get Mr. Cohen. Give him that name and address and tell him we would like to have such information as is readily available. Within an hour if possible."

I got up and went to the phone. The number of the *Gazette* was one I didn't have to consult my notebook for. I told them to go right ahead, that I was used to phoning under difficulties, but they politely kept silence. At that evening hour I had New York in twenty seconds, got Lon, and made the request, but it took two minutes to get rid of him. He wanted an exclusive on how we had got arrested and on the kind of knot I had used on Donahue's necktie, and I had to get rude and hang up on him. As I returned to my chair Wolfe invited the audience, "Do any of you want to ask Miss Bonner any questions?"

Apparently they didn't.

"I think," he said, "that we can best show our appreciation of Miss Bonner's candor by reciprocating it. Mr. Ide? Mr. Amsel? Mr. Kerr?"

Ide sat and pinched the skin over his Adam's apple. Amsel, his arms still folded on the back of his chair, kept his eyes at Wolfe. Jay Kerr made a noise, but it was only a minor belch.

"I can understand," Wolfe said,

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"that by your vocation and training you have developed a high regard for discretion, but I hope you haven't made a fetish of it. According to Miss Bonner, all of you recognized the dead man. In that case, not only had you met him, but also you had met him under circumstances that made you think it hazardous, or at least imprudent, to pretend to no knowledge of him. As Miss Bonner said, what you have told the police can surely be told here, unless you have reason to fear—"

"What the hell," Jay Kerr blurted. "Sure, I knew the skunk. I'll be glad to ante all I know about him, but I want a drink first."

"I beg your pardon," Wolfe apologized, and he meant it. "Away from home I'm not myself, and I even neglect the amenities. Archie? If you please?"

For Dol Bonner it was brandy and coffee, for Sally rum and coke, another flaw, for Ide tea with lemon, for Amsel double bourbon with water, for Kerr double scotch on the rocks, for Wolfe two bottles of beer, and for me double milk. I like a drink occasionally, but not when I'm out on bail. Then I need all my faculties.

Kerr had said he wanted a drink first, so while we waited for the supplies to come up Wolfe went back to some details with Dol Bonner, such as the date Donahue had first called on her, but that was just to pass the time. Or maybe not. I was glad Fritz wasn't there. He suspects every woman who ever crosses the threshold of wanting to take over his kitchen, not to mention the rest of the house. He would have been squirming. Dol Bonner's caramel-colored eyes and long dark lashes were by no means her only physical attractions, and she was the right age, she had shown some sense and had done a pretty good job of reporting, and she was a companion in misery, having also been made a monkey of by Donahue. Of course if Wolfe hung a murder on her she would no longer be a danger, but I noticed that he had stopped frowning at her. Oh, well, I thought, if she hooks him and Sally hooks me we can all solve cases together and dominate the field.

After the drinks had come and been distributed, and Wolfe had taken a couple of healthy gulps of beer, he focused on Jay Kerr. "Yes, sir? You were going to tell us."

Kerr was sipping his scotch. "He played me too. Good. Only not the same pattern exactly. What was eating him was his wife. He wanted his home tapped, an apartment in Brooklyn. He wanted full reports on all voices, male and female, because he thought there might be a male around that shouldn't be there. I can tell you and Miss Bonner too, you got gypped. He gave me two thousand at the go and another pair later."

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"Thank you. I'll demand more next time. When was this?"

"It was early April when he contacted me. After two weeks, sixteen days if I remember right, he called the tap off and settled up."

"What was his name? The name he gave."

Kerr took a sip, swallowed, and made a face. "This whiskey don't taste right, but that's not the whiskey's fault. I had cabbage for dinner. About his name, well, the name he gave was Leggett. Arthur M. Leggett."

"That sounds familiar. L-e-g-g-e-double-t?

"That's right."

"I've seen it. Archie?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "He's the head of something."

"He's the president," Dol Bonner said, "of the Metropolitan Citizens League."

That woman was getting on my nerves. Now she was giving him information he had asked me for and hadn't got, and they weren't even engaged yet. Wolfe thanked her courteously. Courtesy is okay, but I hoped he wasn't making a fetish of it. He asked Kerr, "How did he establish his identity?"

"He didn't."

Kerr took another sip and made another face, and Wolfe turned to me and said sharply, "Taste that whiskey."

I had had the same idea myself. It was beginning to look as if we might have a murderer with us, and only that, it hadn't been long since a guy named Assa, right in our office, had swallowed a drink that had been served to him by me and had dropped dead. Cyanide. Wolfe didn't want a rerun of that one, and neither did I. I went and asked Kerr to let me taste it, and he said what the hell but handed it over. I took in a dribble, distributed it with my tongue, let it trickle down, repeated the performance with a thimbleful, and handed it back to him.

"Okay," I told Wolfe. "It must be the cabbage."

He grunted. "You say he didn't establish his identity, Mr. Kerr? Why not?"

Why should he?" Kerr demanded. "Do you know how many husbands in the metropolitan area get suspicious about their wives every week on an average? Hundreds. Thousands! Some of them come to me for help. A man comes and wants to pay me for expert service. Why should I doubt if he knows who he is? If I tried to check on all of them I'd spend all my time on it."

"You must have heard that name, Arthur M. Leggett. A man of your widespread—uh, activities."

Kerr jerked his chin up. "Look, are you a cop? Or one of us?"

"I'm one of us."

"Then be yourself. Let the cops tell me what names I must have heard. Don't worry, they have and they will. And I reported the tap

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in my statement to the secretary of state, because it was ethical and because I knew I had to. I knew they had two of the technicians singing, and I would have been sunk if they connected me with a job I hadn't reported."

Wolfe nodded. "We have no desire to harass you, Mr. Kerr. We only ask that you contribute your share to our pool of information. You had no suspicion that your client was not Arthur M. Leggett?"

"No."

"And never have had?"

"No."

"Then when you were taken to view the corpse today you must have identified it as Arthur M. Leggett."

"I did."

"I see." Wolfe considered a moment. "Why not? And naturally, when you learned that that wasn't his name you were shocked and indignant, and now you have severe epithets for him. You're not alone in that. So have I; so has Miss Bonner; and so, doubtless, have Mr. Ide and Mr. Amsel." He emptied his beer glass, refilled it, kept his eye on it long enough to see that the rising foam didn't break at the edge, then looked up. "Have you, Mr. Ide?"

Ide put his cup and saucer down on my suitcase, there on the rack, which I had invited him to use. He cleared his throat. "I want to say, Mr. Wolfe, that I feel better than I did when I entered this room."

"Good. Since it's my room, and Mr. Goodwin's, I am gratified."

"Yes, sir. The fact is, my experience with that man was very similar to yours and Miss Bonner's, and I have deeply regretted it. He imposed on me as he did on you, and in the same pattern. If I gave you all the details it would be mostly a repetition of what you and Miss Bonner have said."

"Nevertheless, we'd like to hear them."

"I see no point in it."

Ide's voice had sharpened a little, but Wolfe stayed affable. "One or more of the details might be suggestive. Or at least corroborative. When did it happen?"

"In April."

"How much did he pay you?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"Did he give his name as Donahue?"

"No. Another name. As I said, the pattern was very similar to the one he used with you."

"How did he establish his identity?"

"I prefer not to say. I mishandled it badly. I omitted that detail from my statement to the secretary of state. I suppose Mr. Hyatt will insist on it at the hearing, but I don't think the whole thing will be published, and I'm not going to publish it by telling it here. I was going to say, the reason I feel better is that now I have the consolation of knowing that I'm not the only one he made a fool of."

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"You have indeed. We have all qualified for dunce's caps." Wolfe drank some beer and passed his tongue over his lips. "How did it end? Did you get onto him, or did he call it off as he did with Miss Bonner and Mr. Kerr?"

"I prefer not to say." From the expression on Ide's bony face, with its long hawk's nose, he would prefer to switch to some harmless topic like the weather. "I'll say this much, the tap was discontinued after ten days, and that ended my association with him. Like you and Miss Bonner and Mr. Kerr, I never saw him again until today, and then he was a corpse."

"And you identified the corpse?"

"Yes. There was no other . . . it would have been folly not to."

"You identified it with the name he gave you when he hired you?"

"Of course."

"What was that name?"

Ide shook his head. "It was the name of a respectable and law-abiding citizen. I saw him and told him about it, and he was good enough to accept my apology. He is a very fine man. I hope his name won't have to be dragged into a murder case, and it won't be by me."

"But you have given it to the police, of course."

"No, not yet. I admit I may be compelled to. I can't let my career end by having my license taken away."

Wolfe's eyes went around. "I suggest that we leave the question open whether Mr. Ide has contributed his share, at least until we have heard from Mr. Amsel." They settled on Steve Amsel. "Well, sir?"

"If I don't play I'm it," Amsel said. "Huh?"

"It's not quite as simple as that," Wolfe told him. "But you've heard us, and it's your turn."

"Last one in is a monkey," Kerr declared.

"Nuts. Have I been ast?" There was half a finger left of his double bourbon and water, and he finished it, left his chair to put the glass on the dresser, got out a cigarette and lit it, and turned to prop his backside against the dresser. "I'll tell you how it is," he said. "My situation's a little different. One thing, I was a boob to identify that stiff, but there he was, and in a case like that you can't stall, you've got to say yes or no, and I said yes. Now here we are. Miss Bonner said we might as well tell each other what we've told the cops, and I'll buy that, but my problem's not like yours. You see, I identified him as a guy named Bill Donahue I knew once."

He had already had six pairs of eyes, and with that he had them good. He grinned around at them.

"I said my situation's different. So I was stuck with that. So what I've told the cops. I've told them I'd seen him around a few times last spring, but it was kinda vague, I couldn't remember much about it except that once he came and want-

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ed me to arrange a tap for him and I turned him down. They wanted to know whose wire he wanted tapped, and I tried to remember but couldn't. I said just for a fact I wasn't sure he had told me the name. So that's what I've told the cops, and that's what I'm telling you." He went to his chair and sat.

He still had the eyes. Wolfe's were half closed. He spoke. "I suggest, Mr. Amsel, that since talking with the police you've had time to jog your memory. Possibly you can be a little mor definite about the occasions when you saw Donahue around last spring."

"Nothing doing. Just vague."

"Or the name of the man whose wire he wanted tapped?"

"Nope. Sorry."

"One thing occurs to me. Mr. Kerr has said he knew—to use his words—that 'they had two of the technicians singing.' Supposing that your memory has failed you on another detail, supposing that you did arrange the tap and have forgotten about it—just a supposition—wouldn't your situation be quite untenable if the technicians do remember it?"

"Just supposing."

"Certainly."

"Well, I've heard there were a lot of technicians around. I guess they're pretty scarce now. Supposing the ones doing the singing aren't the ones I used? Supposing the ones I used aren't going to sing?"

Wolfe nodded. "Yes, if I can suppose, you can too. I understand your disinclination to tell us anything you haven't told the police, but I think we may reasonably ask this: did you mention this incident in your statement to the secretary of state?"

"What incident?"

"Your refusal to make the tap requested by Donahue."

"Why should I? We were told to report all taps. We weren't told to report refusals to make taps."

"You're quite right. Did you mention the name of Donahue at all in the statement?"

"No. What for?"

"Just so. You're right again, of course. I'm sure you'll agree, Mr. Amsel, that your contribution is even skimpier than Mr. Ide's. I don't know—"

The phone rang, and I went and got it. It was Lon Cohen. As I spoke with him, or rather, listened to him, Wolfe uncapped the second bottle of beer and poured. The guests were politely silent, as before. Again, after Lon had reported, he wanted the lowdown, and I promised to supply him with an eight-column headline as soon as we got one. I asked him to hold on a minute and told Wolfe, "Alan Samuels is a retired broker, Wall Street. He could live on Park Avenue but prefers the Bronx. His wife died four years ago. He has two sons and two daughters, all married. He gives money to worthy

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causes, nothing spectacular. Harvard Club. Director of the Ethical Culture Society. A year ago the governor appointed him a member of the Charity Funds Investigating Committee. I've got more, but it's not very exciting. Of course you note the item that might possibly be interesting.'"

"Yes. He's still on? Get the names of the members of that committee."

"Right." I went back to Lon. He said he'd have to send to the files, and did so, and then demanded some dope. I couldn't very well tell him that the other suspects were there in our room and Wolfe was doing his damnedest to find a crack to start a wedge in, so I gave him a human interest story about Nero Wolfe's behavior in the jug and other little sidelights. The list came, and he read it off while I wrote it down, and I told him not to expect the headline in time for the morning edition. I tore the sheet off of the memo pad and went and handed it to Wolfe, telling him, "That's it. Just five members, including the chairman."

He looked it over. He grunted. He looked at the guests. "Well. You may remember, from my statement, that Otis Ross is the chairman of the Charity Funds Investigating Committee. You have just heard that Alan Samuels is a member of that committee. So is Arthur M. Leggett. The names of the other two members are James P. Finch and Philip Maresco. It's a pity we have only three out of five. If it were unanimous it would be more than suggestive, it would be conclusive. Can you help us, Mr. Ide?"

Ide was looking uncomfortable. He pinched the skin over his Adam's apple, but that didn't seem to help, and he tried chewing on his lower lip, but since his teeth were a brownish yellow it didn't make him any handsomer. He spoke. "I said I wouldn't drag his name into this, but now it *is* in. I can't help it. You have named him."

"That makes four. Is there any point in leaving it to conjecture whether it was Finch or Maresco?"

"No. Finch."

Wolfe nodded. "That leaves only Maresco, and I hope he wasn't slighted. Mr. Amsel. Doesn't that name, Philip Maresco, strike a chord in your memory? At least a faint echo?"

Amsel grinned at him. "Nothing doing, Wolfe. My memory's gone very bad. But if you want my advice, just forget my memory. It's a cinch. If I was you I'd just take it for granted."

"Very well put. Satisfactory. Do you think it possible, ladies and gentlemen, that it was through coincidence that the five men whose wires Donahue wanted tapped were members of that committee?"

They didn't think so.

"Neither do I. Surely it invites

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inquiry. Miss Bonner, how many competent operatives, not counting Miss Colt, are immediately available to you?"

She was startled. "Why . . . you mean now? Tonight?"

"Tonight or in the morning. What time is it, Archie?"

"Quarter past eleven."

"Then the morning will have to do. How many?"

She considered, rubbing her lip with a fingertip. I admit there was nothing wrong with her lips and she had good hands. "On my payroll," she said, "one woman and two men. Besides them, four women and three men whom I use occasionally."

"That makes ten. Mr. Ide?"

"What's this for?" Ide wanted to know.

"I'll explain. Now just how many."

"It depends on your definition of 'competent.' I have twelve good men on my staff. Eight or ten others might be available."

"Say twenty. That makes thirty. Mr. Kerr?"

"Call it nine. For an emergency I could scare up maybe five more, maybe six."

"Fifteen. That makes forty-five. Mr. Amsel?"

"I pass."

"None at all?"

"Well, I might. I've got no payroll and no staff. Wait till I hear the pitch, and I might."

"Then forty-five." Abruptly Wolfe got to his feet. "Now, if you'll permit me, I must arrange my mind. It shouldn't take long. I beg you to stay, all of you, to hear a suggestion I want to offer. And you must be thirsty. For me, Archie, a bottle of beer."

He moved his chair over near a window, turned it around, and sat, his back to the room.

They all took refills except Sally, who switched to coffee, and Ide, who declined with thanks. After phoning down the order I told them not to bother to keep their voices lowered, since nothing going on outside his head could disturb Wolfe when he was concentrating on the inside. They got up to stretch their legs, and Harland Ide went to Dol Bonner and asked her what her experience had been with women operatives, and Kerr and Amsel joined them and turned it into a general discussion. The drinks came and were distributed, and they went on exchanging views and opinions. You might have thought it was just a friendly gathering, and that nothing like a murder investigation, not to mention an official inquiry that might cost some of them their licenses, was anywhere near, unless you noticed their frequent glances at the back of Wolfe's chair. I gathered that with the men the consensus was that women were okay in their place, which I guess was the way cavemen felt about it, and all their male descendants. The question

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was, and still is, what's their place? I only hoped Wolfe wasn't getting any fleabite of a notion that Dol Bonner's place was in the old brownstone house on West Thirty-fifth Street.

When he finally arose and started turning his chair around I glanced at my wrist. Eight minutes to midnight. It had taken him half an hour to arrange his mind. He moved the chair back to its former position, and sat, and the others followed suit.

"We could hear it tick," Steve Amsel said.

Wolfe frowned at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"In your pan. The knocker."

"Oh. No doubt." Wolfe was brusque. "It's late, and we have work to do. I have reached a working hypothesis about the murder, and I want to describe it and suggest a collective effort. I intend to ask for full co-operation from all of you, and I expect to get it. I'll try to supply my share, though I have no organization to compare with Mr. Ide's and Mr. Kerr's. Archie, I must talk with Saul Panzer and it must be confidential. Can I do so from this room?"

"Good God no." I could have kicked him, asking such a dumb question in front of our fellow members. "Ten to one Groom would have it in ten minutes. And not from a booth in the hotel. You'll have to go out to one."

"Can you find one at this hour?"

"Sure. This is the City of Albany."

"Then please do so, and get him. Tell him I'll call him at eight in the morning at his home. If he has other commitments ask him to cancel them. I need him."

"Right. As soon as we're through here."

"No. Now. If you please."

I could have kicked him again, but I couldn't start beefing in front of company. I went and got my hat and coat and beat it.

If you're no more interested than I was in how I spent the next day, Tuesday, you'll be bored stiff for the next four minutes.

There were happenings, but no developments that I was aware of. First about Monday night and Saul Panzer. Saul is the best there is and I would match him against all of the forty-five operatives our confreres had, all of them put together, but he ought to get home earlier and get to bed. I found a booth easy enough in a bar-and-grill, called the number, and got no answer. Going back to join the conference, and trying again later, was out. When Wolfe sends me on an errand he wants it done, and for that matter so do I. I waited five minutes and tried again, and then ten minutes and another try. That went on forever, and it was a quarter past one when I finally got him. He said he had been out on a tailing job for Bascom, and he was

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going to resume it at noon tomorrow. I said he wasn't, unless he wanted Wolfe and me indicted for murder and probably convicted, and told him to stand by for a call at eight in the morning. I gave him the highlights of the jolly day we had had, told him good night, returned to the hotel and up to room 902, and found Wolfe in bed sound asleep, in the bed nearest the window, with the window wide open and the room as cold as yesterday's corpse. From the open door to the bathroom I got enough light to undress by.

When I sleep I sleep, but even so I wouldn't have thought it possible that an animal of his size could turn out, get erect, and move around dressing and so on, without rousing me. In the cold, too. I would have liked to watch him at it. What got to me was the click as he turned the door knob. I opened my eyes, bounced up, and demanded, "Hey, where you going?"

He turned on the threshold. "To phone Saul."

"What time is it?"

"By the watch on your wrist, twenty past seven."

"You said eight o'clock!"

"I'll get something to eat first. Finish your rest. There's nothing to do, after I speak to Saul." He pulled the door shut and was gone. I turned over, worried a while about how he would squeeze into a booth, and went back to sleep.

Not as deep as before, though. At the sound of his key in the lock I was wide awake. I looked at my wrist: 8:35. He entered and closed the door, took off his hat and coat, and put them in the closet. I asked if he had got Saul, and he said yes and it was satisfactory. I asked how it had gone last night, had our fellow members agreed to co-operate, and he said yes and it was satisfactory. I asked what the program was for us, and he said there wasn't any. I asked him if that was satisfactory too, and he said yes. During this conversation he was removing duds. He stripped, with no visible reaction to the deep freeze, put on his pajamas, got into bed and under the blankets, and turned his back on me.

It seemed to be my turn, I was wide-awake, it was going on nine o'clock, and I was hungry. I rolled out, went to the bathroom and washed and shaved, got dressed, having a little trouble buttoning my shirt on account of shivering, went down to the lobby and bought a *Times* and a *Gazette*, proceeded to the dining room and ordered orange juice, griddle cakes, sausage, scrambled eggs, and coffee. Eventually wearing out my welcome there, I transferred to the lobby and finished with the papers. There was nothing in them about the murder of William A. Donahue that I didn't already know, except a few dozen useless details such as the medical examiner's

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opinion that he had died somewhere between two and five hours before he got to him. It was the first time the *Gazette* had ever run pictures of Wolfe and me as jailbirds. The one of me was fair, but Wolfe's was terrible. There was one of Albert Hyatt, very good, and one of Donahue, which had evidently been taken after the scientists smoothed his face out. I went out for some air, turning up my overcoat collar against the wind, which was nearly as cold as room 902, and found that it was more fun to take a walk when you were out on bail. You want to go on and on and just keep going. It was after eleven o'clock when I got back to the hotel, took the elevator up to the ninth floor, and let myself into the deep freeze.

Wolfe was still in bed, and didn't stir when I entered. I stood and gazed at him, not tenderly. I was still considering the situation when there was a knock on the door behind me, a good loud one. I turned and opened it, and an oversized specimen was coming in, going to walk right over me. I needed something like that. I stiff-armed him good, and he tottered back and nearly went down.

"I'm a police officer," he barked.

"Then say so. Even if you are, I'm not a rug. What do you want?"

"Are you Archie Goodwin?"

"Yes."

"You're wanted at the district attorney's office. You and Nero Wolfe. I'm here to take you."

The correct thing to do would have been to tell him we'd consider it and let him know, and shut the door on him, but I was sorer at Wolfe than I was at him. There had been no good reason for sending me out to phone Saul until the conference had ended. It had been absolutely childish, when he returned from talking with Saul, for him to go back to bed without giving me any idea what was cooking. I had offered to split the blame fifty-fifty, but no, I was the goat and he was the lion. So I moved aside for the law to enter, and turned to see Wolfe's eyes open, glaring at us.

"That's Mr. Wolfe," I told the baboon.

"Get up and dress," he commanded. "I'm taking you to the district attorney's office for questioning."

"Nonsense." Wolfe's voice was colder than the air. "I have given Mr. Hyatt and Mr. Groom all the information I possess. If the district attorney wishes to come to see me in an hour or so I may admit him. Tell Mr. Groom he's an ass. He shouldn't have arrested me. Now he has no threat to coerce me with, short of charging me with murder or getting my bail canceled, and the one would be harebrained and the other quite difficult. Get out of here! No. Ha! No, indeed. Archie, how did this man get in here?"

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"Walked. He knocked, and I opened the door."

"I see. You, who can be, and usually are, a veritable Horatius. I see." His eyes moved. "You, sir. Were you sent for me only or both of us?"

"Both of you."

"Good. Take Mr. Goodwin. You could take me only by force, and I'm too heavy to lift. The district attorney can phone me later for an appointment, but I doubt if he'll get it."

The baboon hesitated, opened his mouth, shut it, and opened it again to tell me to come on. I went. Wolfe probably thought he had landed a kidney punch, but he hadn't. Since I was being kept off the program, kidding with a D.A. was as good a way to pass the time as any.

Another way of passing some time that had occurred to me was to offer to buy Sally Colt a lunch, but it was after two o'clock when the D.A. finally decided I was hopeless. I went to a drug store and called Wolfe, told him the D.A. was hopeless, asked if he had any instructions, and was told no. I called Sally Colt and asked if she felt like taking in a movie, and she said she would love to, but was busy and couldn't. *She* was busy. Fine. I did hope she would find some way of saving me from the electric chair. I started for the fountain counter for a sandwich and milk, remembered that this trip would go on the expense account, went and found the restaurant that Stanley Rogers had recommended, and ordered and consumed six dollars' worth of food, getting a receipt. The waiter told me where I could find a pool hall, and I walked to it, phoned to tell Wolfe where I was, and watched a while, got propositioned by a hustler, took him on at straight pool, and avoided getting cleaned only by refusing to boost the bets to the levels he suggested. He finally decided I was a piker and dropped me. By then it was going on seven o'clock, dinner time coming, but I had no intention of imposing myself on the occupant of room 902, so I mounted a stool to watch a pair of three-cushion sharks. They weren't Hoppes, but they were good. While one of them was lifting his cue for a massé, the cashier called to me that I was wanted on the phone. I took my time going. Let him wait.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mr. Goodwin?"

"Speaking."

"This is Sally Colt. I hated to say no to your invitation, I really did, but I had to. I don't suppose you feel like making it a dinner instead of a movie?"

I took time out for control. Only one person could have told her where I was. But it wasn't her fault. "Sure," I told her. "I eat every day. When?"

"Any time now. At the hotel?"

"No, there's a better place, just

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two blocks away. Henninger's. Shall we meet there in fifteen minutes?"

"It's a deal. Henninger's?"

"That's right."

"I'll be there. I'll tell Mr. Wolfe where we'll be in case he needs us."

"I'll phone him."

"No, I'll tell him, he's right here."

As I went for my coat and hat my feelings were too mixed to sort out. Cold rage. It was okay to make allowances for a genius, but this was to much. Curiosity. What the hell was he doing with her? Relief. At least he was up and dressed, unless his attitude toward women had done a complete somersault. Cheerfulness. Under almost any circumstances it's a pleasure to have a date with a good-looking girl Expectation. Somewhere along the line she might see fit to tell me what my employer was up to.

She didn't. It was a very enjoyable meal, and before it was over I had decided that I would have to concede an exception to my verdict on she-dicks, but not a word about current affairs, and of course I wouldn't ask her. Wolfe had told her to lay off. I can't document that, but we got quite sociable by the time dessert and coffee came, and when a damsel smiles at me a certain way but steers clear of the subject she knows damn well is on top of my mind, she has been corrupted by someone. We were finishing our coffee and considering whether to move to a place down the street where there was a dance floor when the waiter came and told me I was wanted on the phone. I went.

"Hello."

"Archie?"

"Yeah."

"Is Miss Colt with you?"

"Yeah."

"Come to the room, and bring her."

"Yeah."

I returned to the table, told her we were wanted, got the check and paid it, and we left. The sidewalk was icy in spots and she took my arm, which seemed a little sissy for a working detective, but at least she didn't tug. At the hotel, when we got out at the ninth floor she went to her room, 917, to leave her things, and I waited in the hall for her. I had been told to bring her, and since that had been my only assignment for the day I wanted to carry it out properly. She rejoined me, we proceeded to 902, I opened the door with my key, and we entered.

The room was full of people.

"Well!" I said heartily, for I wasn't going to let my bitterness show in public. "Another party, huh?"

Wolfe was in the armchair toward the far wall. The writing table had been moved and was next to him, with papers on it. Dol Bonner was seated across the table from him. She was smirking. If you

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think I'm being unfair, that she wasn't really smirking but was merely showing no signs of misery, you're absolutely right. Wolfe nodded at me. "You may as well leave the door open, Archie. Mr. Groom and Mr. Hyatt are expected momentarily."

My thought, as I put my hat and coat away, was that apparently the son-of-a-gun was going to try to pull one extra fancy and wrap it up in one package—not only put the finger on a murderer for Groom, but also mop up the hearing for Hyatt, as far as that bunch, including us, was concerned. It looked like a big order to fill without my help, but of course he had Dol Bonner. I thought it would be a pity if it turned out that she had knotted Donahue's necktie and he had to fall back on me.

I was glancing around, noting that Ide and Kerr and Amsel were in the chairs farthest away from Wolfe, with two empty ones up front for the expected company, when footsteps sounded in the hall, and I turned. Groom was in the lead. Evidently they had left their coats and hats downstairs.

Wolfe greeted them. "Good evening, gentlemen." He gestured. "Chairs for you."

They stood. Groom said, "I expected something like this. From you. You didn't say it was a convention."

"No, sir. I merely said that if you would come, and bring Mr. Hyatt, I was now prepared to add to my statement substantially and cogently. I prefer to have witnesses present." He gestured again. "If you will be seated?"

Groom looked at Hyatt, swiveled for a glance at me, moved through the gap between Kerr and Sally Colt, picked up one of the empty chairs and placed it against the wall, and sat. That way he had Wolfe and Dol Bonner on his right and the rest of us on his left, and couldn't be jumped from behind. Hyatt wasn't so particular. He didn't bother to move the chair but just sat, although five of us—Ide, Kerr, Amsel, Sally, and I—were in his rear.

"Let's hear it," Groom told Wolfe.

"Yes, sir." Wolfe shifted his chair to face him more directly. "A mass of detail is involved, but I won't cover it exhaustively now. You'll get it. First, the situation as it stood yesterday evening. In an ill-considered excess of zeal, you had arrested Mr. Goodwin and me. Therefore—"

"I know what the situation was."

"Not as I saw it. Therefore I had either to sit here and twiddle my thumbs, trusting to your skill and luck, or bestir myself. To begin with, I needed to learn, if possible, whether any of the other five people—those who had been in room forty-two with Mr. Goodwin and me—had had any association

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with Donahue. I invited them to this room for consultation, and they came. They—"

"I know they did. And today they wouldn't say what happened here. Not one of them. And Goodwin wouldn't. And you wouldn't."

"I will now. This will go faster, Mr. Groom, if you don't interrupt. They were here nearly four hours, and you won't need all of it. As soon as I learned that all of them had recognized the body, and so had known Donahue, and that their times of arrival at that building yesterday eliminated none of them, the inevitable assumption was that one of them had killed him, and I made it. I made it, and held it for about an hour, proceeding with our discussion, when I had to abandon it."

Groom started to speak and Wolfe showed him a palm. "If you please. Perhaps I should say 'suspended' instead of 'abandoned.' I suspended it because my attention was diverted to another quarter. I had noted it as an interesting point that *the seven people who had been associated with Donahue in connection with wire tapping had all been summoned to appear today*. That it had been coincidence was against all probability, but it didn't have to be coincidence. It might have been so arranged purposely, for a comparison of their stories and even to bring them face to face.

"But no. It developed that that wouldn't do. None of us had mentioned Donahue's name in our statements to the secretary of state. Miss Bonner and Mr. Ide and I had all reported being duped by a man who had followed the same pattern with each of us, and our physical descriptions of him agreed, so we three might have been summoned by design to appear on the same day, but not Mr. Kerr and not Mr. Amsel. Mr. Kerr had merely reported tapping the wire of Arthur M. Leggett at Leggett's request. Mr. Amsel reported nothing—that is, nothing that could have linked him to Miss Bonner and Mr. Ide and me. Yesterday he identified Donahue as a man who had once asked him to make a tap and been refused, but he had made no mention of it in his statement to the secretary of state."

"You're getting nowhere fast," Groom declared. "You had all known him. One of you saw him there and killed him."

"But *why* were we all there?" Wolfe demanded. "That Miss Bonner and Mr. Ide and I had been brought together purposely was understandable, but not Mr. Kerr and Mr. Amsel. There was no connection, on the record; and yet they *were* connected, most significantly, since they too had had dealings with Donahue. By coincidence only? I didn't believe it. One of them, possibly, but surely not both. So my attention was diverted to the question, who had arranged for us

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all to be summoned to appear the same day? And simultaneously to another question, was there anything in common among the five men whose wires Donahue had wanted to tap? That suggested still another, why had he gone to five different detectives to arrange for the taps? Might it not have been because the five men *did* have something in common, and he didn't want that fact to be noted?"

Wolfe moved his eyes to Hyatt as if inviting an answer, but didn't get one. He returned to Groom. "My first question had to wait, since I couldn't very well call Mr. Hyatt and put it to him. The second was soon answered. I learned that four of the men whose wires had been tapped were members of the Charity Funds Investigating Committee, and had reason to suppose that the fifth one was also, embracing the entire committee. With that, I decided to describe the situation as I saw it to these ladies and gentlemen, and to enlist their cooperation. If it turned out that my surmise was wrong and one of them was in fact guilty, no harm would have been done; on the contrary, their reactions to my proposal might be indicative. I learned—"

"What proposal?" Groom demanded.

"I'm telling you. I learned that among them they had forty or more operatives in New York, and I could supply four or five. After describing the situation to them, I proposed that we put as many men as possible—and women—to work immediately. There were three main lines: one, the Hotel Marbury, where Donahue had lived; two, the background and interests and activities of Albert Hyatt, with emphasis on any discoverable connection with the Charity Funds Investigating Committee; and three —"

"You mean you suspected Hyatt of murder?"

"I mean I had formed a surmise I thought worth testing, and my confreres agreed with me. I have already put the question, who had arranged for all seven of us to appear on the same day? Mr. Hyatt was conducting the hearing. Another point, which is usually thought significant, but which you seem to have ignored, was that Mr. Hyatt was the last person, as far as was known, to see Donahue alive. Still another was that Hyatt had said that Donahue had told him that I had been given the name Donahue and that I had known the tap was illegal. I knew that either Donahue had lied or Hyatt was lying, and Donahue was dead."

Wolfe lifted his shouders and dropped them. "What I suspected at that point is no longer important. The third line of investigation was to find evidence of former association between Hyatt and Donahue. My confreres made phone calls, and I made one myself. By

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ten o'clock this morning we had—how many operatives, Miss Bonner?"

"By ten o'clock, thirty-four. By two this afternoon, forty-eight. Forty-two men and six women."

Steve Amsel suddenly exploded. "Too many detectives, Hyatt! Cancel our licenses! Too many!"

"Shut your trap!" Jay Kerr ordered him. "Wolfe's telling it."

Wolfe ignored them. "Reports started to reach us before one o'clock and have been arriving all afternoon, up to an hour ago, when we told the people in New York that we had enough for our purpose. Miss Bonner and Miss Colt took most of them, but the others helped. There was no important result from the first line of investigation, the Hotel Marbury. From the second, Hyatt's background and interests and activities, there was nothing conclusive, but much that is pregnant. Eighteen months ago derogatory information about the activities of fund-raising organizations began to appear in the press, and as the weeks passed it increased in volume and significance. A little more than a year ago Mr. Hyatt was retained as consulting counsel by a large fund-raising organization which had realized large profits, variously estimated at from one to three million dollars annually, from its operations. That was about the time that the governor set up the Charity Funds Investigating Committee, and Mr. Hyatt's client might reasonably expect to be a major target of that committee. There is some evidence that Mr. Hyatt approached two members of the committee in an effort to learn its plans—"

"What do you mean, 'some evidence'?" Groom demanded.

Wolfe tapped the papers on the table. "It's here waiting for you, but as I said, it is not conclusive. The committee members were not loquacious with our private operatives, but no doubt they will be more helpful with officers of the law. I merely give you this from our second line of investigation: that Mr. Hyatt was keenly interested in that committee and its plans. The results from our third line were more than pregnant, they were decisive. It was of course the most promising, and thirty of the operatives were assigned to it. They were provided with pictures of Hyatt and Donahue from newspapers, and they found three people who had seen them together on two different occasions last spring—under circumstances that may fairly be described as furtive. I will not oblige Mr. Hyatt by naming the people and occasions and places, but that information is here." He tapped the papers again.

"And Mr. Hyatt has stated, in my hearing and yours, that he had never seen Donahue before yesterday morning. You asked if I suspect him of murder. I do now, yes. There are of course questions I am

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not prepared to answer, except with conjectures if you want them—for instance, the most important one, why did he arrange for all of us—he knew, of course, with whom Donahue had arranged for the taps—to appear before him on the same day? As a conjecture, because that was his best alternative, since we all had to be summoned for inquiry sooner or later, either in New York or in Albany, and he wanted us himself, not his colleague in New York. Having us all on the same day insured that we would all be at hand, to be called back in if occasion demanded it; and if things went smoothly he might well have intended to have us together before him and tell us magnanimously that, since our separate statements corroborated the assumption that we had all been imposed upon by a scoundrel, he would recommend no action against us."

Wolfe turned a hand over. "For he supposed, of course, that Donahue was safely out of the way, out of the state and not to be found. Unquestionably he had so arranged it. The situation held no great hazard for him. The fact that one of his clients was one of the targets of investigation of one of the governor's committees had no known connection with the investigation he was himself conducting, and he was confident that no such connection would be discovered or even suspected. Possibly he was even cocky, for he may have got, from the tapped wires, the information about the committee's plans and intentions that he needed. If so, he got a shattering blow when he answered his phone yesterday morning and was told that a man named Donahue wanted to see him about something urgent and confidential."

Wolfe's eyes went to Hyatt and back to Groom. "If you want another conjecture, what passed between Hyatt and Donahue in room thirty-eight yesterday, the most obvious one is that Donahue threatened to divulge the whole story—either as a screw for extortion, or because Donahue had learned that we seven had been called to appear together and suspected that he was to be made a scapegoat—and the obvious is often the best. Those questions, and others, are your concern, Mr. Groom, not ours. Our only concern was to show you that you were much too ready with a false assumption. As for Mr. Goodwin and me, I suppose you could successfully defend an action for false arrest, but I trust you have learned that it is infantile to take the word of a man as gospel merely because he is a special deputy of the secretary of state. Can the charge against us be dismissed tonight?"

"No. Not until court opens in the morning." Groom got up and went to the table and flattened his hand on the papers. He looked at the special deputy. "Mr. Hyatt, do you

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want to say anything?"

Hyatt was a lawyer. His back was to me, so I couldn't see his face, but I doubt if it was showing anything much. "Except," he said, "that I deny all of Wolfe's allegations and implications regarding me, and that I'll hold him responsible for them, no. I have nothing to say here and now." He got up and started for the door. Groom made no move to stop him, and couldn't be expected to, at least until he had inspected the papers.

Steve Amsel called after him, "Too many detectives, Hyatt!"

Yesterday afternoon I was in the office with Wolfe, discussing a little job we had taken on, when the phone rang and I answered it.

"Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"This is Dol Bonner. How are you?"

"Better than ever."

"Good. May I speak to Mr. Wolfe?"

"Hold it, I'll see." I covered the transmitter and turned and told Wolfe. He made a face, hesitated, and reached for his phone. I kept mine to my ear, since I was supposed to unless he told me otherwise.

"Yes, Miss Bonner? Nero Wolfe."

"How are you?"

"Well, thank you."

"I'm glad I got you. Of course you've heard the news?"

"I don't know. What news?"

"The jury reached a verdict at noon. They found Hyatt guilty of first-degree murder."

"So. I hadn't heard. To be expected, surely."

"Of course. Why I called, Harland Ide phoned me an hour ago. He thinks it would be a little barbarous to celebrate a man's conviction for murder, and I agree, so that's not the idea, but he suggested that we should show our appreciation to you somehow. Anyway, the secretary of state has reported the results of the hearing and we're all going to keep our licenses, so we could celebrate that. Mr. Ide thought we might have a little dinner for you, just the seven of us, and wanted to know if I approved, and I said I did. Just now he called again and said that Mr. Kerr and Mr. Amsel liked the idea, and he asked me to propose it to you. Any evening you choose next week—or as for that, any other week. We hope you will, and of course Mr. Goodwin. And of course Miss Colt."

Silence. I was watching Wolfe's face. His lips were pressed tight.

"Are you on, Mr. Wolfe?"

"Yes, I'm on. I rarely accept invitations to meals."

"I know. This isn't a meal, it's a tribute."

"Which it would be churlish to decline. Mr. Goodwin thinks I *am* churlish, but I don't. I am merely self-indulgent. I offer a counter-

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suggestion. I too feel appreciation, for the efficient and effective cooperation I received. I suggest that instead of dining at some restaurant, which I suppose is intended, you people come to my house for dinner. Any evening next week except Thursday."

"But that would be turning it wrong side up!"

"Not at all. I said I feel appreciation too."

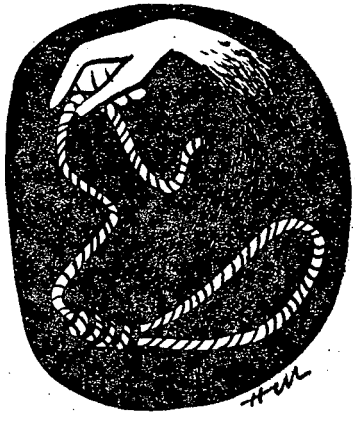
"Well... shall I ask Mr. Ide? And the others?"

"I wish you would."

"All right. I'll let you know."

And she did. In less than an hour. It's all set for next Wednesday evening. I'm looking forward to it. It will be a treat to see Fritz's face when he sees Dol Bonner, seated at Wolfe's right, aim her caramel-colored eyes at him under her long dark lashes.

As for the fifty-fifty split on the blame for our wire tap, that's still under discussion off and on. And as for my being left off the program that day in the City of Albany, that needed no discussion. Since all the work had to be done by the 48 operatives in New York and there was nothing I could contribute, why deal me in? Especially since I could be useful as a diversion for Groom and the D.A.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

a new story by

AUTHOR: **RAY BRADBURY**

TITLE: ***The Town Where No One Got Off***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Rampart Junction, Iowa

TIME: A strange day

COMMENTS: *Walter de la Mare once wrote: "It is utter nonsense to assume that an imaginative piece of poetry is lacking in reality. An imaginative experience is not only as real but far realer than an unimaginative one."*

CROSSING THE CONTINENTAL United States by night or by day on the train, you flash past town after wilderness town where nobody ever gets off. Or rather, no person who doesn't *belong,* no person who hasn't roots in these country graveyards, ever bothers to visit their lonely stations or attend their lonely views.

I spoke of this to a fellow-passenger, another salesman like myself, on the Chicago-Los Angeles train as we were crossing Iowa.

"True," he said. "People get off in Chicago—everyone gets off there. People get off in New York, in Boston, in L.A. People who don't live there go there to see and come back to tell. But what tourist ever got off at Fox Hill, Nebraska, just to *look* at it? You? Me? No! I don't know anyone, got no business there, it's no health resort, so why bother?"

"Woudn't it be a fascinating change," I said, "some year to plan a really different vacation? Pick some village lost on the plains where you don't know a soul and go there for the hell of it?"

"You'd be bored stiff."

"I'm not bored thinking of it!" I peered out the window. "What's the next town coming up on this line?"

"Rampart Junction."

I smiled. "Sounds good. I might get off there."

"You're a liar and a fool. What do you want? Adventure? Romance? Go ahead, jump off the

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train. Ten seconds later you'll call yourself an idiot, grab a taxi, and race us to the next town."

"May be."

I watched telephne poles flick by, flick by, flick by. Far ahead I could see the first faint outlines of a town.

"But I don't think so," I heard myself say.

The salesman across from me looked faintly surprised.

For slowly, very slowly, I was standing up. I reached for my hat. I saw my hand fumble for my one suitcase. I was surprised, at myself.

"Hold on!" said the salesman. "What're you doing?"

The train rounded a curve suddenly. I swayed. Far ahead I saw one church spire, a deep forest, a field of summer wheat.

"It looks like I'm getting off the train," I said.

"Sit down," he said.

"No," I said. "There's something about that town up ahead. I've got to go see. I've got the time. I don't have to be in L. A., really, until next Monday. If I don't get off the train now, I'll always wonder what I missed, what I let slip by when I had the chance to see it."

"We were just talking. There's nothing there."

"You're wrong," I said. "There is."

I put my hat on my head and lifted the suitcase.

"By God," said the salesman, "I think you're really going to do it."

My heart beat quickly. My face was flushed.

The train whistled. The train rushed down the track. The town was near.

"Wish me luck," I said.

"Luck!" he cried.

I ran for the porter, yelling.

There was an acient flake-painted chair tilted back against the station platform wall. In this chair, completely relaxed so that he sank into his clothes, was a man of some seventy years whose timbers looked as if he'd been nailed there since the station was built. The sun had burned his face dark and tracked his cheek with lizard folds and stitches that held his eyes in a perpetual squint. His hair smoked ash-white in the summer wind. His blue shirt, open at the neck to show white clocksprings, was bleached like the staring late afternoon sky. His shoes were blistered as if he had held them, uncaring, in the mouth of a stove. His shadow under him was stenciled a permanent black.

As I stepped down, the old man's eyes flicked every door on the train, then stopped, surprised, at me.

I thought he might wave.

But there was only a sudden coloring in his secret eyes, a chemical change that was recognition. Yet he had not twitched so much as his mouth, an eyelid, a finger. An invisible bulk had shifted inside him.

The moving train gave me an

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excuse to follow it with my eyes. There was no one else on the platform. No autos waited by the cobwebbed, nail-shut office. I alone had departed the iron thunder to set foot on the choppy waves of platform timber.

The train whistled over the hill.

Fool! I thought. My fellow-passenger had been right. I would panic at the boredom I already sensed in this place. All right, I thought, fool, yes, but run, no!

I walked my suitcase down the platform, not looking at the old man. As I passed, I heard his thin bulk shift again, this time so clearly I could hear it. His feet were coming down to touch and tap the mushy boards.

I kept walking.

"Afternoon," a voice said faintly.

I knew he was not looking at me but only at that great cloudless spread of shimmering sky.

"Afternoon," I said.

I started up the dirt road toward the town. One hundred yards away, I glanced back.

The old man, still seated there, stared at the sun, as if posing a question.

I hurried on.

I moved through the dreaming late afternoon town, utterly anonymous and alone, a trout going upstream, not touching the banks of a clear-running river of life that drifted all about me.

My suspicions were confirmed: it was a town where nothing happened, where only the following events occurred: At four o'clock sharp, the door of Honneger Hardware slammed as a dog came out to dust himself in the road; four thirty, a straw sucked emptily at the bottom of a soda glass, making a sound like a great cataract in the drug store silence; five o'clock, boys and pebbles plunged in the town's river; five fifteen, ants paraded in the slanting light under some elm trees.

And yet—I turned in a slow circle — somewhere in this town there must be something worth seeing. I knew it was there. I knew I had to keep walking and looking. I knew I would find it.

I walked, I looked.

All through the afternoon there was only one constant and unchanging factor: the old man in the bleached blue pants and shirt was never far away. When I sat in the drug store he was out front spitting tobacco that rolled itself into tumblebugs in the dust. When I stood by the river he was crouched downstream making a great thing of washing his hands.

Along about seven thirty in the evening I was walking for the seventh or eighth time through the quiet streets when I heard footsteps beside me.

I looked over and the old man was pacing me, gazing straight ahead, a piece of dried grass in his stained teeth.

"It's been a long time," he said.

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We walked along in the twilight.

"A long time," he said, "waitin' on that station platform."

"You?" I said.

"Me." He nodded in the tree shadows.

"Were you waiting for someone at the station?"

"Yes," he said. "For you."

"Me?" The surprise must have shown in my voice. "But why? You never saw me before in your life."

"Did I say I did? I just said I was waitin'."

We were on the edge of town now. He had turned and I had turned with him along the darkening river bank toward the trestle where the night trains ran over going east, going west, but stopping rare few times.

"You want to know anything about me?" I asked suddenly. "You the sheriff?"

"No, not the sheriff. And no, I don't want to know nothing about you." He put his hands in his pockets. The sun had set now. The air was suddenly cool. "I'm just surprised you're here at last, is all."

"Surprised?"

"Surprised," he said, "and . . . pleased."

I stopped abruptly and looked straight at him.

"How long have you been sitting on that station platform?"

"Twenty years, give or take a few."

I knew he was telling the truth; his voice was as easy and quiet as the river.

"Waiting for me?" I said.

"Or someone like you," he said.

We walked on in the growing dark.

"How do you like our town?"

"Nice, quiet," I said.

"Nice, quiet." He nodded. "Like the people?"

"People look nice and quiet."

"They are," he said. "Nice, quiet."

I was ready to turn back but the old man kept talking and in order to listen and be polite I had to walk with him in the vaster darkness, in the tides of field and meadow beyond the town.

"Yes," said the old man, "the day I retired, twenty years ago, I sat down on that station platform and there I been, sittin', doin' nothin', waitin' for something to happen. I didn't know what, I didn't know, I couldn't say. But when it finally happened, I'd know it. I'd look at it and say, Yes, sir, that's what I been waitin' for. Train wreck? No. Old woman friend come back to town after fifty years? No. No, it's hard to say. Someone. Something. And it seems to have something to do with you. I wish I could say—"

"Why don't you try?" I said.

The stars were coming out. We walked on.

"Well," he said, slowly, "you know much about your own insides?"

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"You mean my stomach or you mean psychologically?"

"That's the word. I mean your head, your brain. You know much about *that?"*

The grass whispered under my feet. "A little."

"You hate many people in your time?"

"Some."

"We all do. It's normal enough to hate, ain't it, and not only hate but, while we don't talk about it, don't we sometimes want to hit people who hurt us, even *kill* them?"

"Hardly a week passes we don't get that feeling," I said, "and put it away."

"We put away all our lives," he said. "The town says thus and so, mom and dad say this and that, the law says such and such. So you put away one killing and another and two more after that. By the time you're my age, you got lots of that kind of stuff between your ears. And unless you went to war, nothin' ever happened to get rid of it."

"Some men trap-shoot, or hunt ducks," I said. "Some men box or wrestle."

"And some don't. I'm talkin' about them that don't. Like me. All my life I've been saltin' down those bodies, putting 'em away on ice in my head. Sometimes you get mad at a town and the people in it for makin' you put things aside like that. You like the old cave men who just gave a hell of a yell and whanged someone on the head with a club."

"Which all leads up to . . ."

"Which all leads up to: everybody'd like to do one killin' in his life, to sort of work off that big load of stuff, all those killin's in his mind he never did have the guts to do. And once in a while a man has a chance. Someone runs in front of his car and he forgets the brakes and keeps goin'. Nobody can prove nothin' with that sort of thing. The man don't even tell himself he did it. He just didn't get his foot on the brake in time. But you know and I know what really happened, don't we?"

"Yes," I said.

The town was far away now. We moved over a small stream on a wooden bridge, near the railway embankment.

"Now," said the old man, looking at the water, "the only kind of killin' worth doin' is the one where nobody can guess who did it or why they did it or who they did it to. Right? Well, I got this idea maybe twenty years ago. I don't think about it every day or every week. Sometimes months go by, but the idea's this: only one train stops here each day, sometimes not even that. Now, if you wanted to kill someone you'd have to wait, wouldn't you, for years and years, until a complete and actual stranger came to your town, a stranger who got off the train for no reason, a

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man nobody knows and who don't know nobody in the town. Then, and only then, I thought, sittin' there on the station chair, you could just go up and when nobody's around kill him and throw his body in the river. He'd be found miles downstream. Maybe he'd never be found. Nobody would ever think to come to Rampart Junction to find him. He wasn't goin' there. He was on his way some place else. There, that's my whole idea. And I'd know that man the minute he got off the train. Know him, just as sure . . ."

I had stopped walking. It was dark. The moon would not be up for an hour.

"Would you?" I said.

"Yes," he said. I saw the motion of his head looking at the stars. "Well, I've talked enough." He sidled close and touched my elbow. His hand was feverish, as if he had held it to a stove before touching me. His other hand, his right hand, was hidden, tight and bunched, in his pocket. "I've talked enough."

Something screamed.

I jerked my head.

Above, a fast-flying night express razored along the unseen tracks, flourished light on hill, forest, farm, town dwellings, field, ditch, meadow, plowed earth and water, then, raving high, cut off, shrieking, gone. The rails trembled for a little while after that. Then silence.

The old man and I stood looking at each other in the dark. His left hand was still holding my elbow. His other hand was still hidden.

"May I say something?" I said at last.

The old man nodded.

"About myself," I said. I had to stop for a moment—I could hardly breathe. Then I forced myself to go on. "It's funny. I've often thought the same way as you. Sure, just today, going cross-country, I thought. How perfect, how really perfect it could be. Business has been bad for me lately. Wife sick. Good friend died last week. War in the world. Full of boils, myself. It would do me a world of good—"

"What?" the old man said, his hand still on my arm.

"To get off this train in a small town," I said, "where nobody knows me, with this gun under my arm, and find someone and kill him and bury him and go back to the station and get on and go home and nobody the wiser and nobody ever to know who did it. Perfect, I thought, a perfect crime. And I got off the train."

We stood there in the dark for another minute, staring at each other. Perhaps we were listening to our hearts beating very fast.

The world turned under me. I clenched my fists. I wanted to fall. I wanted to scream, like the train.

For suddenly I saw that all the things I had just said were not lies put forth to save my life.

All the things I had just said to this man were true.

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And now I knew why I had stepped from the train and walked up through this town. Now I knew what I had been looking for.

I heard the old man breathing hard and fast. His hand was tight on my arm as if he might fall. His teeth were clenched. He leaned toward me as I leaned toward him. There was a terrible silent moment of immense strain as before an explosion.

He forced himself to speak at last. It was the voice of a man crushed by a monstrous burden.

"How do I know you got a gun under your arm?"

"You don't know." My voice was blurred. "You can't be sure."

He waited. I thought he was going to faint.

"That's how it is?" he said.

"That's how it is," I said.

He shut his eyes tight. He shut his mouth tight.

After another five seconds, very slowly, very heavily, he managed to take his hand away from my own immensely heavy arm. He looked down at his right hand then, and took it, empty, out of his pocket.

Slowly, with great weight, we turned away from each other and started walking blind, completely blind, in the dark . . .

The midnight *Passenger To Be Picked Up* flare sputtered on the tracks. Only when the train was pulling out of the station did I lean from the open Pullman door and look back.

The old man was seated there with his chair tilted against the station wall, with his faded blue pants and shirt and his sunbaked face and his sunbleached eyes. He did not glance at me as the train slid past. He was gazing east along the empty rails where tomorrow or the next day or the day after the day after that, a train, some train, any train, might fly by here, might slow down, might stop. His face was fixed, his eyes were blindly frozen, toward the East. He looked a hundred years old.

The train wailed.

Suddenly old myself, I leaned out, squinting.

Now the darkness that had brought us together stood between. The old man, the station, the town, the forest, all were lost in the night.

For an hour I stood in the roaring blast staring back at all that darkness . . .

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One of the most enjoyable short-shorts of recent years

CUB SCOUT CAPER

by GERTRUDE CARRICK

I DO NOT LIKE LITTLE BOYS, ESPECIALLY little boys between the ages of eight and eleven—freshly scrubbed little boys with sparkling eyes, eager little faces, and snatching little hands; little boys who pop bubble gum, slurp soft drinks, and shout joyously, "Mrs. Garrett, I made a booboo!" Yes, I mean cub scouts.

When I murmured something of the sort to the mayor as he was pinning that medal to my best pink sweater, he cleared his throat and chuckled politely. But I wasn't being funny. My allergy to little boys—notwithstanding the fact that I'm the mother of three—is completely genuine.

For I have been den mother of Den Two, Pack Six Forty, of this city for three years—thirty-six months—which is something of a record. Most den mothers last only about three months. And many, after only one meeting, develop distressing nervous ailments that prevent them from continuing.

Many times in the midst of the tumult and the shouting, which is one of my den meetings, a still small voice inside me will inquire, "What are you doing here?" For the truth of the matter is I don't have any of the qualifications possessed by the other den mothers. I'm not a good and indefatigable cook like Mrs. Dawson. I do not have the disposition of an angel like Mrs. Newbury. Nor can I hammer a nail, play a piano, or tell the birds from the flowers.

All I have is endurance. And it was because that was beginning to wear thin that all this happened.

You see, all that month we had been making things. In my living room. Seven cubs, two little brothers, and two visitors or would-be cubs.

It says in the book that what the boys make should be concocted from scrap material and be useful. For example, you take a ten-gallon milk can, paint it black, punch holes all over it, then fasten on bangles from an old chandelier, and you have an ideal receptacle for storing fly swatters. But I have discovered, long as it takes to assemble such items, it takes even longer to remove the black paint from the ceiling and to dig out the smashed glass from the rug.

After a meeting my throat is so hoarse from screaming, "Jimmy,

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put down that comic book!" "Bobby, stop splattering paint on Michael," and "Timmy Mathews, you go sit in a corner and fold your hands!" that it is days before I can speak above a whisper.

But what is to me the most harrowing of all is that happy triumphant shout, "Mrs. Garrett, I made a booboo!" At that my blood runs cold. It can mean nothing more than the child has pasted a picture upside down. Or it can mean he has just kicked over another can of aluminum paint.

It was after some such incident that I suggested that next time we go visit the art museum. I had forgotten all about the recent small-painting thefts. But the boys hadn't. Immediately they were all set to save the museum guards the trouble of catching the thief. They had a theory that he used a disguise that they alone could detect.

"Oh, nooooo!" I cried, getting a mental picture of them swarming all over the museum yanking at the beards of innocent old men and knocking the hats off dear old ladies. "I want it firmly understood that we are going to the museum to look at the pictures and the statues—not to catch dangerous criminals. Is that clear?"

"Yes, but if while we're looking at the pictures we just happen to catch the robber, that would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"No, it would not," I said firmly. "And I want no peashooters, slingshots, or cap pistols brought along on this expedition."

When I called the museum, they told me we could come the following Monday and that they'd announce our coming on their entrance bulletin board, so it was all definite and official.

On that fateful day the boys arrived at my house promptly; and in their little blue-and-gold uniforms they looked adorable. I reminded them once more about the firearms, they nodded angelically, and off we went.

On the way, they competed to see who could shout "Crazy woman driver!" loudest at all the cars driven by women. And one cub socked another cub because the first one had socked the second one first—or something like that. And someone else lost a nickel down behind the back seat, and someone else bit someone else's finger for a reason I never did determine. A typical normal trip in a car with seven cubs and, as usual, four extras.

Because of the museum's rule that there must be at least fifteen children in a group, Mrs. Dawson's den went with us. We met them on the museum steps and went in together—twenty of us in all.

Now the destruction that cubs can cause in a living room is nothing to the destruction they could cause in an art museum, if

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given a free hand. Immediately I found myself whispering, "Don't touch, Billy," "Don't touch, Timmy," as frequently as I shout in my living room, "Stop that!"

However, I was gratified to notice that Mrs. Dawson was whispering equally as often. Her cubs giggled at the nudes just as hysterically as mine, nudged and jostled one another just as much, and drew from the guards just as many dirty looks. In fact, we hadn't progressed very far before we had behind us a little phalanx of six guards who followed us from gallery to gallery.

All Mrs. Dawson's cubs were just as obstreperous and ulcer-making as mine, except one. He was so quiet and well behaved that I feared he was sick. But I couldn't watch him as I would have liked to because, naturally, I had to keep my eyes on my own cubs.

It wasn't until we entered the French Room that we had our first crisis. I was admiring a huge Fragonard when suddenly—whango!—upon the rounded behind of one of the cherubs there blossomed a rubber-tipped dart. Of course. I had said no pea-shooters, slingshots, or cap pistols; I had said nothing about dart guns.

Instantly all six guards descended on us; and for a moment I thought the entire membership of Den Two was going to be forcibly ejected from the museum. It was only because of Mrs. Dawson's golden tongue that we weren't. She persuaded the guards to give my boys one more chance.

After that the guards stuck more closely to us than ever, but not close enough, unfortunately, to prevent the disaster that occurred in the west wing. There's a pool there into which grateful museum visitors throw coins. Well, each and every one of my cubs had to teeter on the very edge of it and pretend to grab for the money.

And then—kerplop splash—a cub scout slipped and landed up to his little pink ears right in the middle of the pool. Timmy Mathews. It would be Timmy Mathews.

"We'll have to get him home and into dry clothes right away!" I said as I hauled him out and wrapped my coat around him. "Come on, Den Two, hurry—but don't run!"

Our exit was pretty wild and scampery, but during it I did notice that the unusually well-behaved cub from Mrs. Dawson's den was with us. When we converged at the door, all the other cubs bolted through, but he politely stepped aside and waited for me to go first.

"Does Mrs. Dawson know you're leaving with us?" I asked.

"Yes, she does, Mrs. Garrett. She told me to go now because I'm supposed to meet my dad

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around the corner in the drugstore at five, and it's almost that now." A very articulate answer for a cub. Mostly when you ask them questions you don't know any more after they've answered than you did before.

He and I walked down the steps of the museum together. He didn't make noises like a jet, jump three steps at a time, or tell me any little moron jokes. Nor did he dash ahead to join the other cubs, who were balancing on the low wall by the walk. He walked along beside me, descending one step at a time, sedately and properly.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked him. "I mean, does your tummy hurt, or your head?"

He looked up at me and smiled. He was better looking than most cubs because his ears didn't stick out and he had no freckles across his little snub nose.

"Why, no, thank you, I'm feeling fine," he said. "It's just that so much beauty overwhelms me. I think art galleries are very awe-inspiring, don't you?"

While I was wondering if I could have heard correctly there came from the museum a noise rather like that of a gigantic alarm clock. My quiet and polite little friend tipped his cub-scout cap at me and scampered off.

"Stop him, boys!" I shouted. "Grab him, don't let him get away!"

Never before or since have they obeyed me with such alacrity. It was just like a cowboy picture on television. In no time at all he was down on the grass with all Den Two sitting on top of him.

"I got his gun, Mrs. Garrett!" sopping-wet Timmy Mathews shouted at me. "I think it's real, too. Here, catch!"

That was when I fainted. When I'd heard the museum's burglar alarm go off, I'd realized that he must be a midget and would therefore have a real gun, but when Timmy Mathews calmly tossed it at me, that was too much. So I never did actually witness Den Two's moment of triumph when they handed the thief over to the museum guards, and one of the guards pulled a rolled-up canvas out of his right sleeve. For while we were causing all that commotion with the dart gun and the Fragonard, he had slipped away to a guardless gallery and cut the picture from its frame.

I don't think you will blame me for making the harsh comments I did to the mayor when you hear what those little boys did to me just before the mayor gave me that medal. They presented me with a gold-embossed parchment from The Boy Scouts of America, signed by President Eisenhower, which says that, because of what I did, I am now to be honorary den mother of Den Two, Pack Six Forty, *for the rest of my living days!*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **AVRAM DAVIDSON**

TITLE: ***"Thou Still Unravished Bride"***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Bonn and Steinberg

LOCALE: A big city in the United States

COMMENTS: *One of the great themes: a bride-to-be vanishes on the eve of her wedding — but this time with as new an interpretation as you might read in today's newspaper.*

IT USED TO BE SAID, IN SOME CIRCLES, that "a lady" had her name in the newspapers exactly three times: when she was born, when she was married, and when she was buried. It was never altogether true, for "a lady" was entitled to be mentioned when she became a mother, too.

Of course, there are ladies who, even today, are not likely to be seen in the public print at all. This is not because they are hyper-lady-like; it is because they live in large cities and are obscure—and poor. Sally Benner was certainly a lady of this class. And yet she received attention enough in the newspapers because—it appeared—she was not going to be married, and perhaps not buried, either.

Mrs. Benner heard Sally stirring at six in the morning. At seven Sally started to get up, but her mother pushed her back. "There's plenty of time," Mrs. Benner said. "You didn't get to bed till late, and you need your rest. I'll tell you when to get up." So the young woman said, "Yes, mother."

She was a very obedient daughter. That was what made it all so odd.

At eight Mrs. Benner let her get up. Sally took a shower and came down to breakfast, kissed her father, kissed her mother. The two women clung to one another, shed a few tears. Old Joe Benner looked up from his coffee and waffles and growled a bit. "Women," he said,

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addressing the canary. "The way they cry about weddings makes you wonder why they bother about 'em at all."

"You shut up," said his wife, without malice. "You were so pale at your own wedding that the minister didn't know whether to marry you or bury you." And she gave a little whimper of laughter.

"I've often wished it was the last," Joe said—and pretended to duck as Mrs. Benner gave him a light smack on the cheek with her hand. "That's for being so fresh," she said. He captured his wife's hand and held onto it and told Sally that he hoped she'd be as happy with her Bob as he and her mother had been with each other.

That was the way the start of the day went. No sparkling dialogue, exactly, no dramatics. The Benners were respectable working-class people. They had four children. The other girl, Jeannie, the eldest, had been married off long enough ago for Mr. B. (he said) to recoup his fortunes for the wedding of his youngest.

There was going to be a reception at the church, then a family supper at Leary's Restaurant, then a big reception (with dancing) at Anderson Hall. After that the newlyweds would take off on their honeymoon at—but of course no one presumably knew where that was to be except Sally and Bob. Mrs. Mantin, Sally's mother-in-law-to-be, had thrown out some pretty strong hints that *Someone* ought to know Where (meaning: *She* ought to).

"Suppose there's an emergency of some sort comes up?" Mrs. Mantin had asked her son more than once, with a snivel standing by in case her son—whom she was now about to Lose Forever—should talk sharply to her.

"Keep the old man out of the bottle and there won't be no emergency," Bob said. But he told her after a while that his older brother Eddie was privy to the secret, and she had to be content with that.

After Sally went in to dress and her mother attacked the dishes and her father (he had his own plumbing business) prepared to just step around and check up on the arrangements, Mrs. Benner remarked, "Well, never let it be said again in my presence that the Lord don't answer prayers. How many years I been praying for Sally to find a nice fellow!"

"He took His time, though, didn't He? Seeing how Bob lives right down the block here. But," Mr. Benner hastened, as Peg Benner turned on him ready for battle, "I'm not complaining. Long as they're suited, *I'm* suited." But he didn't get off that easily; his wife let him know that it was seldom enough that *he* went to church, and it wasn't *him* who had the heartbreak all these years waiting and watching and worrying, and it was all for the best because early mar-

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riages weren't near as likely to last.

After he left, his married daughter Jeannie came over, and so did their two daughters-in-law, and so did Sally's best friend, and also Mrs. Benner's sister Emma. They examined the bridal gown and the guest list and the presents and they hugged Sally and started crying a little, to warm up for the evening. Suddenly it was ten o'clock and they looked up as the church clock started chiming and there was Sally, dressed to go out.

"And where do you think *you're* going?" Aunt Emma demanded, in a mock-ferocious tone. "You better behave—you're not too big to be hit, you know!"

Sally said she was just going out to pick up a few things at the store. She was a tall, quiet girl; pink and slow and sweet. The failure of the male race to snap her up years ago had long been held against it by all distaff branches of the Benner family.

"What things?" demanded Aunt Emma. "What could you buy that ain't been bought already?"

Her best friend said she'd go with Sally. Her sister Jeannie said to wait just a minute, she'd drive them down. But Sally, for all her quiet and obedience, had a mind of her own. She said, "No, I'll just go by myself."

"Ah, let her go," said her mother. "Let her get a breath of air and take a little walk. Here's the whole lot of us jabbering away—let the girl alone." She waved at her daughter, who waved back as she walked off down the street.

It was lined with two-story wooden houses; they were set right next to one another. They were all kind of on the small side, but each had a back yard and a front yard, a tree and a little garden and some potted plants, and some had a swing on the porch and stained glass in the front door. It was a comfortable neighborhood, a quiet one, known to even the older generation from childhood. It was safe, it was home.

"Listen here, Peg," Aunt Emma demanded. "I wanna see that seating list. If you've put me and Sam next to Maymie Johnson like you did at *Jeannie's* wedding—"

Mrs. Benner gave the sigh of one who has—or as nearly as makes no difference—married off her last child, a daughter aged thirty, and for whom life holds no further problems; and she said to her sister, "Oh, if you didn't have sumpthing to complain about, Emma, I honestly believe you'd *die*. Maymie Johnson, poor thing, hasn't set foot out of her house in *munce*." Emma said, No! and asked what was wrong, and Mrs. Benner said, "Well, she had like what they use to call dropsy, but nowadays the doctors gave it another name . . ."

Sally rounded the corner and came face to face with Bob Mantin, on his way back from the barber

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shop with his brother Eddie. She said, "Oh!" and blushed. Eddie cried, "Hey, you ain't supposed to see your bride the day of the wedding, it's bad luck!" and he playfully put his hand over Bob's eyes.

Bob pushed aside the hand. He and Sally gazed at each other. Neither, it seemed, could think of anything to say. Finally Eddie asked Sally where she was going, and she said, to the store to get a few things. He said, "Oh."

Bob broke silence at last. "Well, I'll, uh, see you tonight, honey."

Sally nodded, and they parted.

"—so I said to her, "Well, it's up to them, Mrs. Mantin,' I said. 'Joe and me, we put it up to them,' I said. 'We let them choose. Do you want a big wedding or would you rather have the money to buy furniture?' we asked them. And they talked it over and the decision was entirely theirs. 'I know it's very nice of you and Bob's father to move all your things off of the second floor and put in a kitchen and all,' I said. 'But if they want to buy furniture, I mean such expensive furniture, that they have to do it on time, why, that's up to them,' I said. 'That's up to *them*.'" Mrs. Benner's sister, her older daughter, her daughters-in-law, and her younger daughter's girl-friend, all listened to Mrs. Benner and nodded. Occasionally they punctuated her recital with Believe *Me* or *I'll* Say and Imagine *That!*

And then the church clock began to chime eleven. The expression on Mrs. Benner's face (at once combative and self-excusing) changed immediately. "Why, what's happened to Sally?" she exclaimed.

At first her emotion was one of mere affectionate annoyance. By half-past eleven she had begun to feel vexed. By twelve she was experiencing a definite anxiety. Jeannie got into her car and went to look for her sister. Mrs. Benner got on the telephone and began calling places where it was possible Sally might have stopped off, to get so engrossed in conversation as to forget this was her wedding day. The girl friend (a thin girl with a skin condition, named Agnes, who had —after the first outburst of joyful congratulations — begun to moan that after the wedding Sally wouldn't want her around any more) left to call on a few people who had no telephone. One of the sisters-in-law went around the corner to Mr. Benner's shop, as his line was busy.

"What is he doing there, anyway, so long?" fretted his wife. "He should of been back here long ago—hello, Sadie? Peg. Is Sally there? Oh . . . Well, *was* she there? This morning. I mean. She wasn't? All right, Sadie, I'll see you this—no, no, it's all right, I just thought she might of dropped by. Tonight, then, Sadie. 'Bye."

And so it went. Sally hadn't been to anybody's house, even the Man-

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tins'. Bob's brother Eddie answered the phone. He told of their having met on her way to "the store." When? Oh . . . a little after ten. No, she didn't say which store. "Should I tell Bob? I mean, I will right now if you want me to, but—I mean, she'll prob'ly turn up any minute now, so why get him nervous for nothing? But if you want me to—" Mrs. Benner said, no, he was right, there was no point in getting Bob upset, too.

By half-past one they had canvassed all the stores in the neighborhood. The only one where Sally had been seen was Felber's Pharmacy. She had bought some things, the druggist said, at about ten or fifteen minutes after ten. She had seemed okay. When Mr. Felber said to her, handing over the package (cosmetics, hairpins, chewing gum), "Well, today's the big day, eh, Sally?" she had smiled and said, "I'm so happy, Mr. Felber." He had wished her all the luck in the world.

By now it was half-past two. Suddenly Aunt Emma, who had been saying, "Oh, I wouldn't *worry,* Peg, she's prob'ly just wandering around in a kind of sky-blue-pink daze"—Aunt Emma suddenly burst into tears and said, "Well, I don't care what *anybody* says: *I* think we oughta call the *police!*"

And all the women broke down and began to wail, and so Mr. Benner found them when he returned. And after he got them quieted down, that was what he did. He phoned the police.

The wedding was called off, but quite a number of guests turned up anyway—some, because they hadn't got the word, others because they thought Sally might turn up in time for the wedding to take place after all. Naturally, they all made their way to the house; and the police decided not to turn them away because—who knows?—one of them might know something that would shed light on the matter.

But no one knew anything.

Late that night Detectives Bonn and Steinberg were talking about it with Captain Foley. "Everybody says the same thing," Bonn observed. "She was a nice, sweet, quiet girl. She was a homebody. She's had no broken engagements, no troublesome ex-boy friends. She never even went steady before. So far as anybody knows, the girl was perfectly happy with the marriage. Except for the fiancé, his brother, and the druggist, though, nobody seems to have seen her once she left the old lady's sight."

Steinberg took up the tale. "The fiancé seems to be okay. Nobody knows anything against him, and even if they did, he's been with some member of his own family all day long—brother, mother, father. *He* says she *couldn't've* run off by herself. Crying like a baby, the guy was. At the same time he doesn't want to admit she maybe met with foul

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play. So he says it's got to be amnesia."

Bonn was dark and thin, Steinberg was red-haired and stocky. Captain Foley, who was pale and bald, asked, "What about the druggist? And don't give me that line. He sold her vanishing cream."

Bonn said, "Well, as a matter of fact, Captain, he did. Vanishing cream, face powder, deodorant, hairpins—and a pack of chewing gum."

Foley shook his head. "That don't sound like no suicide to me. I know, I know—people have committed suicide on the eves of their weddings before. But a girl who's going to kill herself don't buy deodorants and chewing gum. Even if the river *is* only five blocks away, I'm not buying suicide. No, either she made a voluntary disappearance—in which case she ought to have her butt smacked, not letting the family know—or else it was foul play. And if she was attacked, she's most likely dead by now. They've been through every empty building in the neighborhood?"

"Not only in the neighborhood, but in that whole section of the city," said Steinberg. "How could she be the victim of violence in broad daylight, at ten o'clock in the morning, in a place where everybody knew her?" But Captain Foley said the violence needn't have occurred in the neighborhood. A car pulls up to the curb, a guy offers her a ride, she gets in—what's to notice? he asked. And then the car drives off. She wasn't the kind of girl to accept a ride from a stranger? Then maybe it wasn't a stranger . . .

The story was in the morning papers, and the usual crowd had gathered (or rather, was circulating; the police wouldn't let them stop) near the Benners' house. Mrs. Benner was in her room, having failed to fight off the effects of a sedative the doctor made her take. Joe Benner and Bob, red-eyed, were sitting together in the kitchen drinking black coffee.

"It was amnesia," Bob repeated for the thousandth time. "She wouldn't run off. Not Sally. Her picture's in the papers, somebody's bound to see her."

"Sure," Sally's father repeated, his face reflecting no such optimism. "Sure."

Bonn and Steinberg mingled with the crowd. They looked and listened.

"They ought to call in the FBI."

"Can't do that unless there's evidence of a kidnaping."

"They oughta drag the river."

"Evidence —whadayacall evidence?"

"They must of had a quarrel. Don't tell *me*. They had a lover's tiff, and the boy friend's ashamed to say."

"They oughta drag the river."

"My cousin he run out on his own wedding once. But a guy,

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that's a different thing. Know what I mean?"

The next day Mrs. Benner went on television and appealed to her daughter to return home, or—if for any reason she was unwilling to do this—at least to communicate with her family. For the afternoon and evening news she was joined by Bob Mantin. He begged Sally's forgiveness if he had offended her in any way. He asked only that she notify them if she was all right. The minister of the Benners' church issued a statement.

But no one heard a word from her. The usual flow of evil communications began, by mail and phone. Sally's body was in an alley on the other side of town. Sally was being held for ransom. A woman had seen her from the window of a bus in another state; she was coming out of a bar.

"Speaking of bars," suggested Bonn, "let's circulate in a few of them. For all I know the girl is what they say she is, but maybe she isn't. If there's any dirt, you hear it over the bar." Steinberg nodded.

Perhaps it is because Americans have guilt feelings about drinking during daylight hours that almost all bars are dark and dim. When the first place fell into focus after the bright street, the detective partners observed that there was a moderate gathering in the bat-cavern. An elderly woman with wild white hair and a cracked-enamel face was crooning into her beer, "I don't care, you go ahead 'n laugh if you wahnoo, but I say, in my opinion, all these young girls disappearing: it's the white slave trade. What I think."

"Naa," said a sharp-looking young man a few stools down. "That's all a thinga the past. No mystery in *my* opinion. Girl changed her mind. Woman's privulidge, is'n it, Mabel? And she's afraida go home."

The man to his right met this suggestion with such an insufferable smirk that the sharp-looking fellow was nettled. "All right, Oscar," he said, "whadda *you* think?"

"I think they oughta drag the river," said Oscar. Bonn looked up. He saw out of the corner of his eye that his partner had caught it, too.

"Weren't you over by the Benners' place yesterday?" Steinberg asked Oscar.

Oscar said, "Yeah, he'd went over to a take a look. But the cops kept moving everybody on."

"*You* saw that, did'n ya? Howdaya like that? 'Move along, keep moving,'" he mimicked. "No wonder they ain't found nothing out yet. Waste all their time like that."

Bonn said, "Yeah, well, I heard you make the observation at that time that they ought to drag the river."

"And I *still* say it."

Mabel ordered another beer. The sharp-looking young man took a

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look at Bonn, observed Steinberg, affected a startled glance at the clock, and was suddenly gone. Steinberg moved into his place. "Well, now, Oscar, that's a long, long river," he said. "Where do you think they ought to start dragging? Because unless they pick the right spot, they could spend a year and not find anything. Where would you imagine is the best place?"

Oscar studied his face in the mirror. Bonn moved in from the other side. "From the Point, maybe?" Bonn suggested. Oscar snorted. Bonn, seemingly offended, said, "What's the matter with the Point?"

Steinberg said, "Well, where then? Come on, Oscar. I'm really interested."

"You guys reporters or sumpthing?"

Bonn nodded. Oscar brightened, turned to face him.

"No kidding?" he exclaimed. "You writing up this story?"

"I've got my car outside," Bonn said. "Why don't we take a ride down by the river?" Oscar thought that was a fine idea. He and Bonn went out.

Steinberg said to the bartender, "And who might that guy be?"

The bartender shrugged. "One of old man Portlin's nephews. Old lady died maybe a month back, Portlin don't like to live alone so he invites Oscar to move in with him. What does Oscar do? Well, matter of fack, I don't b'lieve he does *anything*. Except play cards, drink beer, and watch the TV. And shoot off his big mouth, like for instance just now."

There were parks along the river, wastes, factories, and docks, some of them abandoned. Bonn and Oscar Portlin walked along one of the docks. "Look how dangerous it is," said Oscar. "Girl could of come down for a walk, tripped, and—zing!—in she goes. See what I mean? Maybe hit her head going over. Then she wouldn't come up or yell for help or nothing. You hadda lotta experience with incidents like that. Whadda *you* think?"

It was a pleasant day, the breeze whipping the water lightly. Sea gulls swooped and skimmed low, creeing to one another. Out in the river a tug passed slowly by with a string of barges. "I think," said Bonn, after a pause, "that it sounds very possible. I think we ought to tell the police." Oscar's reply to this was a short, blunt syllable. "Don't like the police much, huh?" Oscar's lip went *psshh!* "They give you a hard time? A bum rap, maybe?"

That did it. "Boy, you can say that again!" Oscar burst out. His rather nondescript face darkened.

Sympathetically, Bonn asked what the rap was. "Off the record, of course."

Oscar smirked. "Off the record? Statchatory Rape. It was a bum rap. She *said* she was eighteen. How

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was *I* supposed to know? She was a tramp, anyway. Everybody knew that."

Bonn said, gee, that was too bad. But he still thought they ought to see the cops.

When Oscar still demurred, Bonn took out his badge. Then — in silence—they went back to his car.

"She was always such a *good* baby," said Mrs. Benner in a tear-choked voice to a lady reporter. "See, this picture here. When she was only eight months old . . ." She showed the reporter photos and locks of hair and letters and school books—her daughter's life from infancy to womanhood.

What did Sally like to read when she was young? the lady reporter asked.

"Poetry," said Mrs. Benner. "She always liked high-class poetry." She blew her nose. "This little book here, now, she bought this with her own money." Mrs. Benner belonged to a class and generation which did not buy books; that fact alone would have served to grace the small volume even if it were not hallowed by having belonged to her missing daughter. "It's the poems of John Keats. She always used to say to me, 'Oh, Mama, they're so beautiful!' She particularly liked this one—I know the name the minute I see it—Oh. Here. This one." She moistened her lips and prepared to read, following the line with her finger.

"Thou still unravished bride of quietness . . ."

Her voice was measured and proud. As the meaning of what she had just read penetrated her awareness, she looked up at the reporter, then over at her daughter's picture on the piano. Then she raised her hands, and screamed, and dropped her face into her hands and cried again and again in her grief and fear and anguish.

"All right," said Steinberg, "so it was a bum rap, she was a tramp, she said she was eighteen. So let's forget that one. What else you been sent up on? We'll find out soon enough."

Oscar mumbled that he was never convicted of anything else.

"So you weren't convicted. What were you tried for, besides this one? Nothing? Sure? Okay. Ever charged with anything else? What were you charged with?"

The man looked around the small cubicle. He tried to smirk again, but failed. "Ah, that was a bum rap, too. Wouldn't even press charges."

"What was it?"

Oscar swallowed, took another long look around. Then, not meeting anyone's eyes, he said loudly, "Rape. But she did'n' even press the charge!"

Bonn said, "What makes you so sure the girl's in the river? Did you put her there?"

"No. Naa. I never even seen her."

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"You kept saying that the police ought to drag the river," Steinberg hammered away. "Why? You put her in the river, didn't you? She resisted you and you killed her. Isn't that what happened?"

"Or maybe," Bonn suggested persuasively, "it was an accident? You didn't mean to kill her? So maybe you made a pass—what the hell, it could happen to anybody!—only she was a dumb kid, she got scared . . ."

Oscar nodded slowly, his lips beginning to settle into their habitual smirk.

Bonn went on, "She started to run, tripped on that rotten old dock, fell and hit her head. Maybe it was like that, huh? It could've happened to anybody. Why don't you tell us, kid? Then we can wrap this up, you cop a plea, get a few months which you can do them standing on your head! Give us the details, that's all we want. We find the body, settle the whole matter. Let's have the story. The stenographer takes it down, we order in some lunch—you hungry, huh?—we get some steak and some French fries—"

The smirk was in full reign now. Oscar shook his head, slowly, admiringly. "I got to hand it to you," he said. "Boy, you must have eyes in the back of your head. Yeah, that's just how it happened. She trips and falls and hits her head. I feel for the pulse—there's no pulse. The dame's dead. So, I mean, I panicked. I figured, who'd believe me? With my record. You know what I mean? So I threw her in the river." He looked up at the two detectives.

Bonn asked, very softly, "Where did you throw her in? Right where you showed us?" Oscar nodded. Bonn's sigh was echoed by Steinberg. For a minute no one spoke. Then Bonn said, "Well, I better go tell them so they can start dragging. And then I guess the family has to be told. Okay, Steinberg, you get the truth out of this monkey—"

"But I *told* you the truth," Oscar protested. He was bewildered; the tone of the last remark had frightened him. "That's just how it happened, like you said. 'Accident.'"

His face bleak, the officer said, "That story wouldn't convince my six-year-old daughter, and she still believes in Santa Claus. You know what I think of when I meet characters like you? Suppose when *she* grows up—" Abruptly he turned and said, "Take care of him, Steinberg," and walked out.

Bonn drove his car three times around the block where the Benners lived. Finally he parked and started up the steps. "They ought to have the police chaplains take care of things like this," he muttered. His finger hesitated on the bell. A noise, a babble of voices, that he had unconsciously assumed was a neighbor's television, was coming from the Benner house.

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He tried the door. It was open. He walked in.

The apartment was crowded, everyone shouting and crying and laughing. *Hysteria!* he thought. *It's finally hit them!* Mrs. Benner and a young woman were sobbing and clutching each other, rocking back and forth. Bonn turned to old Joe Benner, who was crying, tears running down his face. "Mr. Benner," he began.

"Oh. Lord, the police!" someone said. "We didn't tell the police!"

"Tell us *what?"* Bonn demanded. And then they all started yelling at once and Mrs. Benner released the young woman, who turned around to face him; and he saw that it was her daughter **Sally.**

Bonn sat down abruptly.

"Oh, I feel so ashamed," Sally said, starting to cry again.

Bob Mantin hugged her and sniffled, "Never mind, honey; never mind, honey."

"Why?" asked the detective. "Why did you do it, Miss Benner? Where were you?"

"Oh, it was such a silly thing—I'm so ashamed. It was just this awful impulse. It started in the drug store when Mr. Felber said, 'Well, today's the big day,' and I said, 'I'm so happy, Mr. Felber." And then I got outside and it was like I heard another person saying, 'Are you *really* happy? Do you *really* love him?' And I said to myself, 'Gee, I don't know! I don't really know. Maybe I don't love him. Maybe I was only desperate because here I am thirty years old and no one else ever asked me to marry him.' And I thought, 'Oh, wouldn't it be terrible to get married if I wasn't sure?' I was like in a daze. So I got on the bus and rode to the station and I took this train to Chicago. And when I got there, I read in the papers about how nobody knew what had happened to me, so I just took the train back. Oh, I feel so ashamed! I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble."

The detective stared at her. She didn't look very bright, but even so —"You just took the train back," he repeated. "You didn't even bother about a phone call or a telegram! No, Sis, you didn't give us any trouble. You only had every police officer on the force working overtime for four days, that's all! You only—"

But he was interrupted. A fat woman in eyeglasses (Aunt Emma) said, "Well, aren't you the brave one, yelling at this poor little girl! I s'pose you're disappointed she isn't dead, huh?"

Bonn stared at her. "Well, excuse me, lady," he said. "But that's just exactly what I did think, and you know why? Because some psycho down at the jail just confessed killing her and dumping her body in the river!" And Bonn snatched the telephone and dialed headquarters. "Steinberg? Listen, this is all for nothing. Call off dragging the river—"

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His partner said, "What do you mean, call it off? Where are you? At the Benners? Better bring one of them down to identify the body."

Bonn said, "*What* body?"

Steinberg said impatiently, "The *girl's* body. They found it first thing. She was right where he dumped her in, poor kid. Her dress was snagged on a spike, that's why the body didn't come up. Bring one of them down to identify her. Better make it the brother-in-law."

Bonn hung up, feeling that he needed time to set Steinberg straight. All he could do was look at Sally Benner and tell himself that her disappearance had not been "all for nothing" after all.

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